



TRUE TENCHI MUYO!

by YOUSUKE KURODA
and MASAKI KAJISHIMA

vol. **3**
WASHU

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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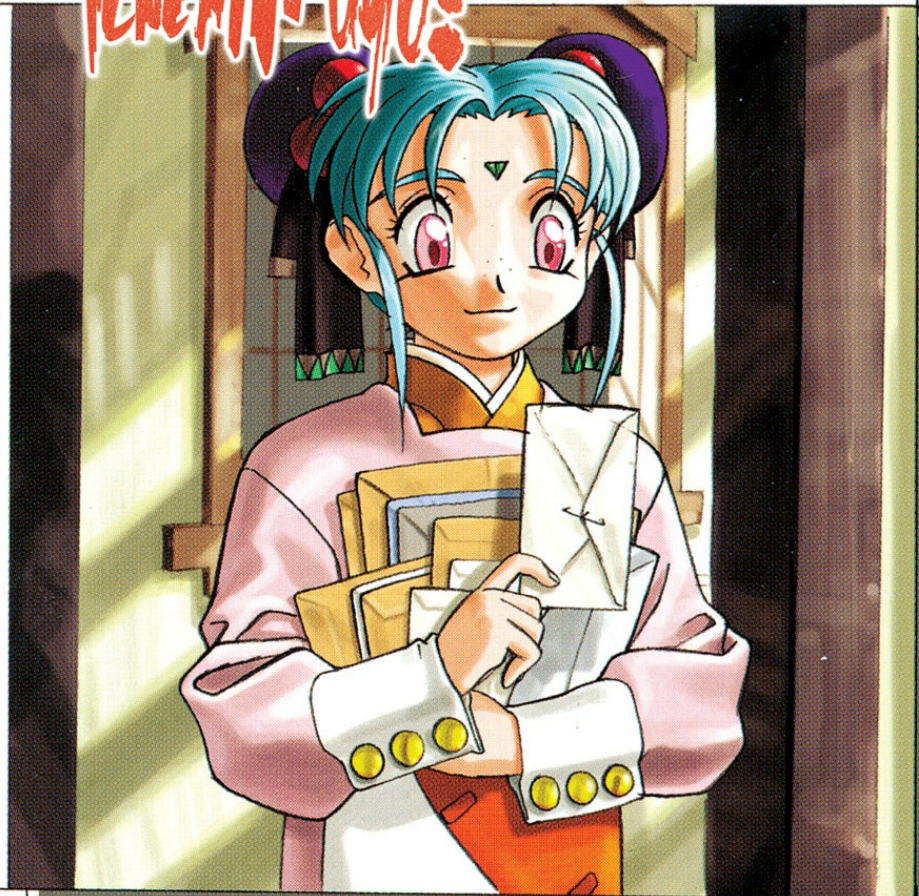
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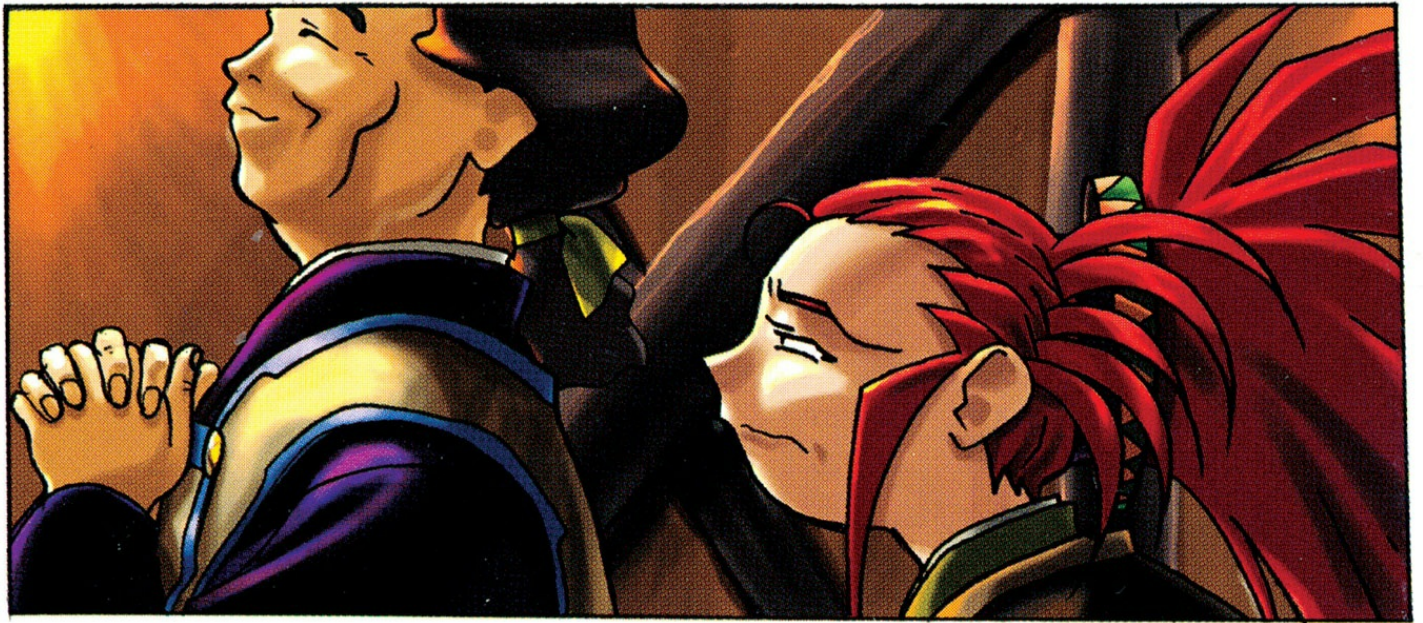
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VOLUME 3 WASHU

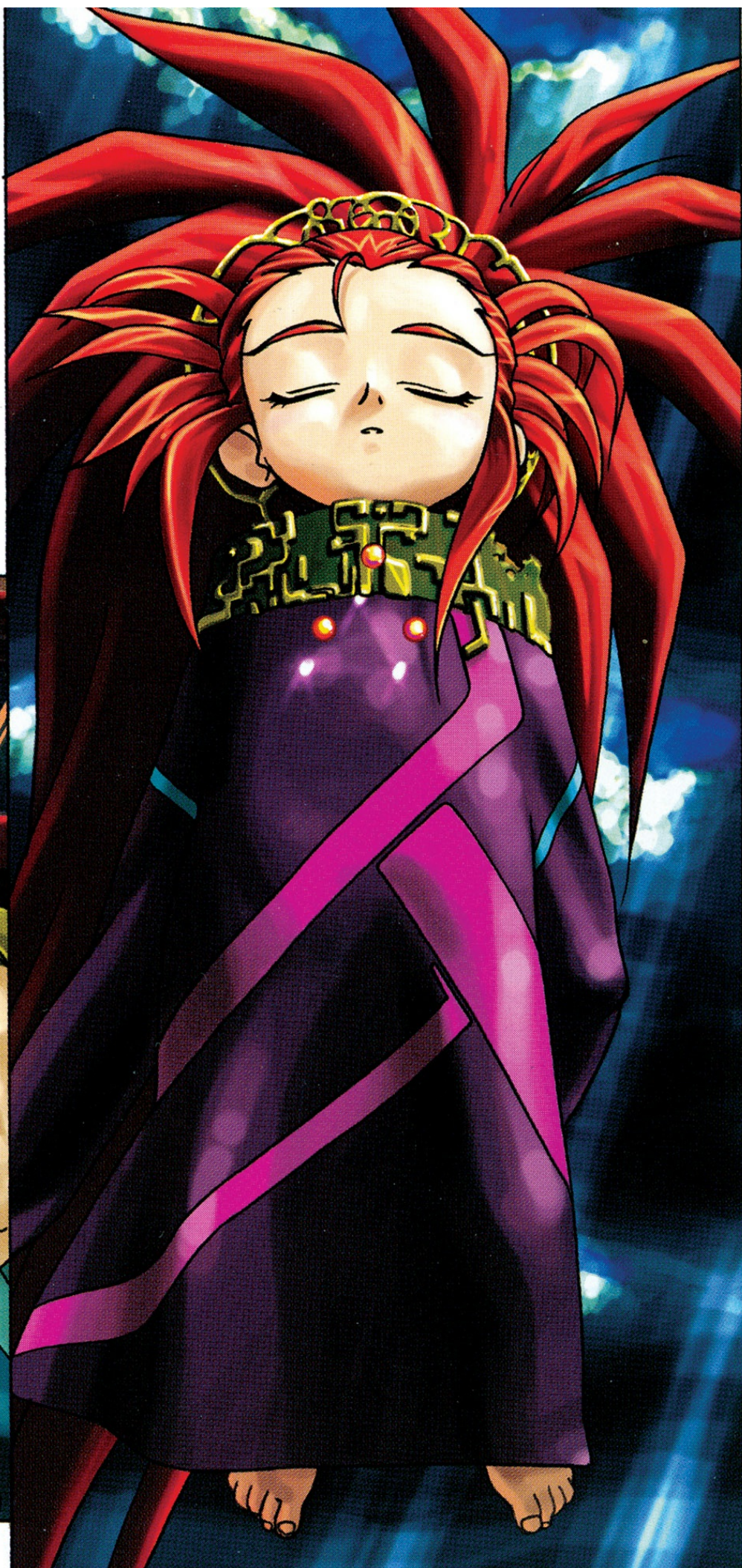
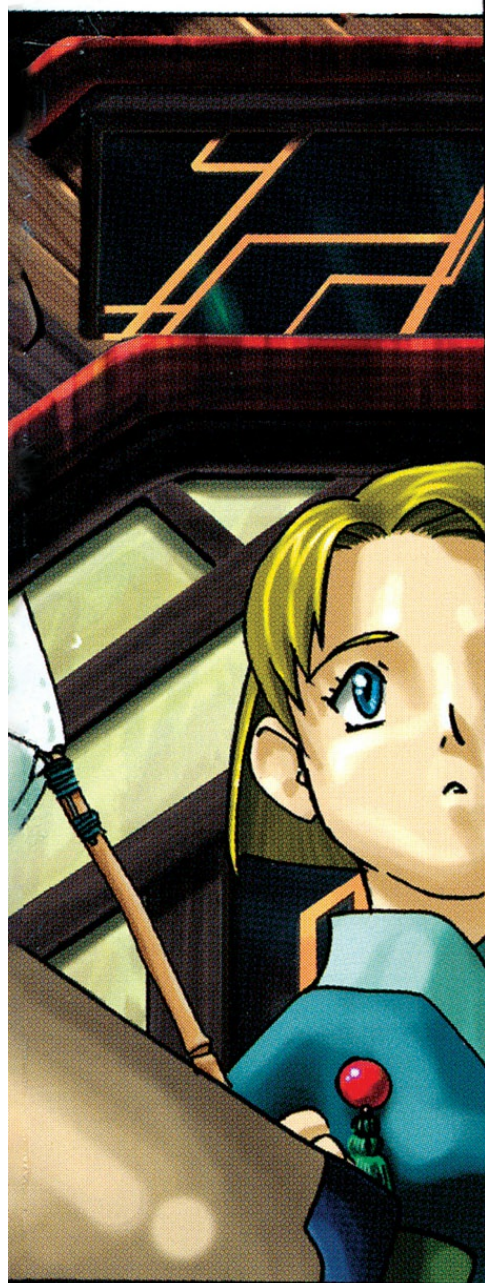


A single letter addressed to Washu... This simple white envelope in Sasami's hand would evoke a sad memory for Washu...





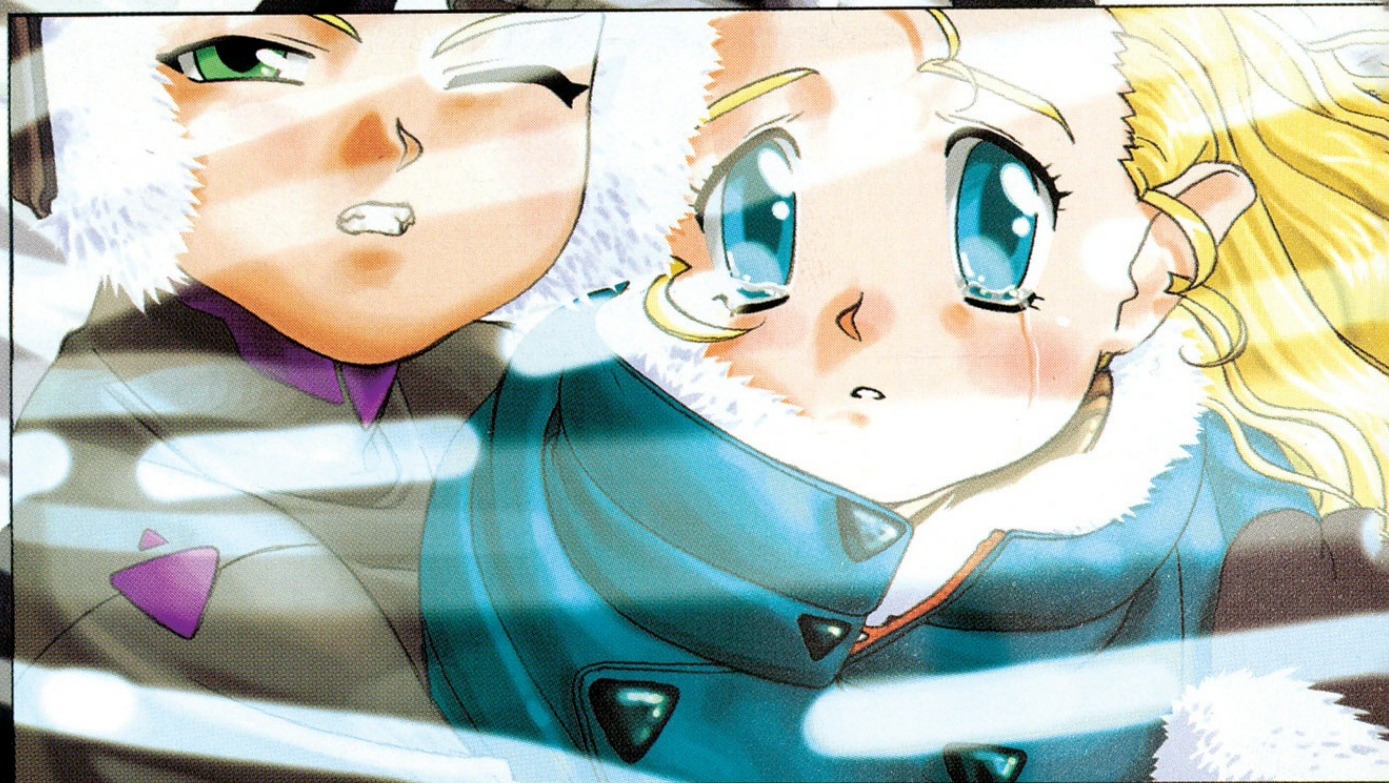
The day that the young Washu arrived at the orphanage...
"You were like a child sent from heaven; it was like a dream," the director reminisced as Washu was about to depart for the Imperial Academy.





"Oniichama!"
The girl ran to
the boy in
tears, turning
her sad eyes to
Washu.

Washu stared
at the boy
whose eyes
were the same
green as her
own, and the
girl...



SHIN TENCHIMUYO! RYO O KI Vol. 3 WASHU

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VOLUME 3
WASHU

BY

*Yousuke Kuroda &
Masaki Kajishima*



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Memories in Snow

There was a curious door in the dining room of the Masaki household. It was a run-of-the-mill closet door, utilizing the space under the stairs that led to the second floor. An ordinary, wooden door. However, it was curiously built. Behind it was another staircase, but the steps only seemed to go down about a meter or so from the floor, with nothing beyond. It was quite a pointless door.

Indeed, it was peculiar...

“Let’s see, these are for Grandpa...” Sasami brought in an armful of mail from the gateposts—or rather, the gatekeepers-cum-mailboxes, Azaka and Kamidake, Ayeka’s two Guardians—and came into the dining room, sorting the letters in an organized fashion.

But then, there was not much sorting to do. Besides the occasional letter for Tenchi, all the mail delivered to the Masaki household was addressed to Katsuhito, the shrine priest. Needless to say, there was no way Sasami and the others, who were not from Earth, would get any mail.

She knew that it was their choice to be here, but it was just the other day that Sasami had to say goodbye to her parents, whom she had not seen in so long. A whisper of loneliness brushed past her heart. She did not show any of this emotion as she spread out the letters on the tatami mats in the dining area. With cheeks still smattered with freckles, Sasami looked like a young girl, but she had achieved remarkable psychological growth since arriving here on Earth.

When she came to the fifteenth plain white envelope, Sasami paused. “Huh...? This one’s for Washu-oneechan.” She looked more closely at the letter. “Hakubi Washu-sama... Yup, it’s to Washu-oneechan. Let’s see, who’s it from...?”

“Meow!” Right when Sasami flipped over the envelope to verify the sender’s name, she noticed that humanoid Ryo-Ohki, who had transformed into a little girl, sat perched beside her. “Meow.” As if expecting something, Ryo-Ohki cried

again. Her hands clutched the small, carrot-shaped knapsack Ayeka had made for her.

Sasami chuckled and offered the stack of mail to Ryo-Ohki. “Ryo-chan, here’s today’s lot.”

Ryo-Ohki always took Katsuhito’s mail to the shrine at the top of the hill. She merrily stuffed the letters into her bag and dashed outside, happy that there was something she could do to help, whether it was with Sasami’s work or someone else’s.

“Off you go. Be careful now!” Sasami saw her off and took the remaining letters upstairs. “Oh! That’s right. There was a letter for Washu-oneechan today.”

Only mail for Katsuhito or Tenchi got sent to the Masaki household. Sasami was in the habit of taking Tenchi’s letters to the desk in his room immediately after entrusting Katsuhito’s pile to Ryo-Ohki. She paused to ponder whether she should go give Washu her letter first. Then she laughed to herself. “Heh...it doesn’t matter who’s first.” She gave herself a little slap on the forehead and airily went up the stairs.

On the spacious third floor landing, Ryoko leaned against the many carrot-shaped cushions she had gathered, reading manga from the library of Tenchi’s father, Nobuyuki. She was currently reading *Checking In ☆ On You*, volume seventeen of twenty. In volume seventeen, Michiko, the main character, went through an ill-fated breakup with her lover, Tomohiro. It was quite the page-turner.

Sasami spotted Ryoko as she came up the stairs and called out, “Oh! Ryoko-oneechan!”

“Hey.” Ryoko responded by popping her hand up, not taking her eyes off the page. She didn’t turn to face Sasami because she was right at an emotional scene and tears were in danger of spilling from her eyes. Ever since she merged with Ryoko Zero, it had gotten easier for her to empathize with this kind of story.

Sasami, of course, had no way of knowing this. “Ryoko-oneechan, I’d like to air out the cushions in the sun... Is that okay?”

“Here ya go.” The cushions came flying towards Sasami without missing a beat, but they were not aimed *at* her. They sailed over her head, past the door to Tenchi’s room and the metal-framed glass sliding door left open for ventilation, and landed perfectly on the deck beyond.

Sasami went to place Tenchi’s mail on his desk as the carrot cushions continued to sail through the air behind her. She quietly watched Ryoko’s perfect-as-always aim, waited for a pause in the pitching, and popped her head out to thank her. “Thanks, Ryoko-onee-whoa!!”

A carrot cushion hit Sasami’s face with perfect timing. She came to her senses at Ryoko’s laughter, and glared at her, clutching the cushion on top of her head. “Ryoko-oneechan!”

Before she could throw it back, Ryoko phased through the floorboards, carrying her manga. Phasing through solid walls was one of her special abilities.

“She got away...” Sasami muttered. Carrying the cushion to the deck, she dusted it off, and lined all the cushions up on top of the two bamboo poles threaded through the railing. *Airing them out in the sun, flipping them over once, and leaving them there until evening should get them nice and fluffy.* Sasami did this every day because Ryo-Ohki loved sitting on the fluffiest cushions. *This’ll make Ryo-chan happy.* Imagining Ryo-Ohki happily frolicking with the cushions, Sasami smiled, forgetting Ryoko’s little prank.

By the time Sasami finished up and came downstairs, Ryo-Ohki had also returned from her delivery. “That was fast. Thanks, Ryo-chan.” It had been less than twenty minutes. Ryo-Ohki could barely waddle a few months ago, and now she could reproduce her critter mode’s speed when in human form. “I’m going to deliver a letter to Washu-oneechan. Want to come with me?”

“Meow!” Ryo-Ohki answered happily. With Sasami leading her by the hand, they went to the door below the stairs, holding the letter for Washu.

“Washu-oneechan?” Sasami knocked and opened the door matter-of-factly. A peculiar view spread before them. There was that ordinary closet door, which led to the space below the stairs. In fact, there *were* stairs, but they only went down about a meter underground and were pretty useless. However, beyond the door Sasami opened was a vast space that should have been physically

impossible.

This structurally-useless door led to the lair—ahem, *laboratory*—of Hakubi Washu, a scientific genius, and the greatest mind in the galaxy. Close to the center of the room (which was too big to even be called a room) sat Washu, tapping away at her terminal. The monitor was covered in geometric forms. She was overseeing simulations of her research, analyzing results, and generally conducting some questionable experiments.

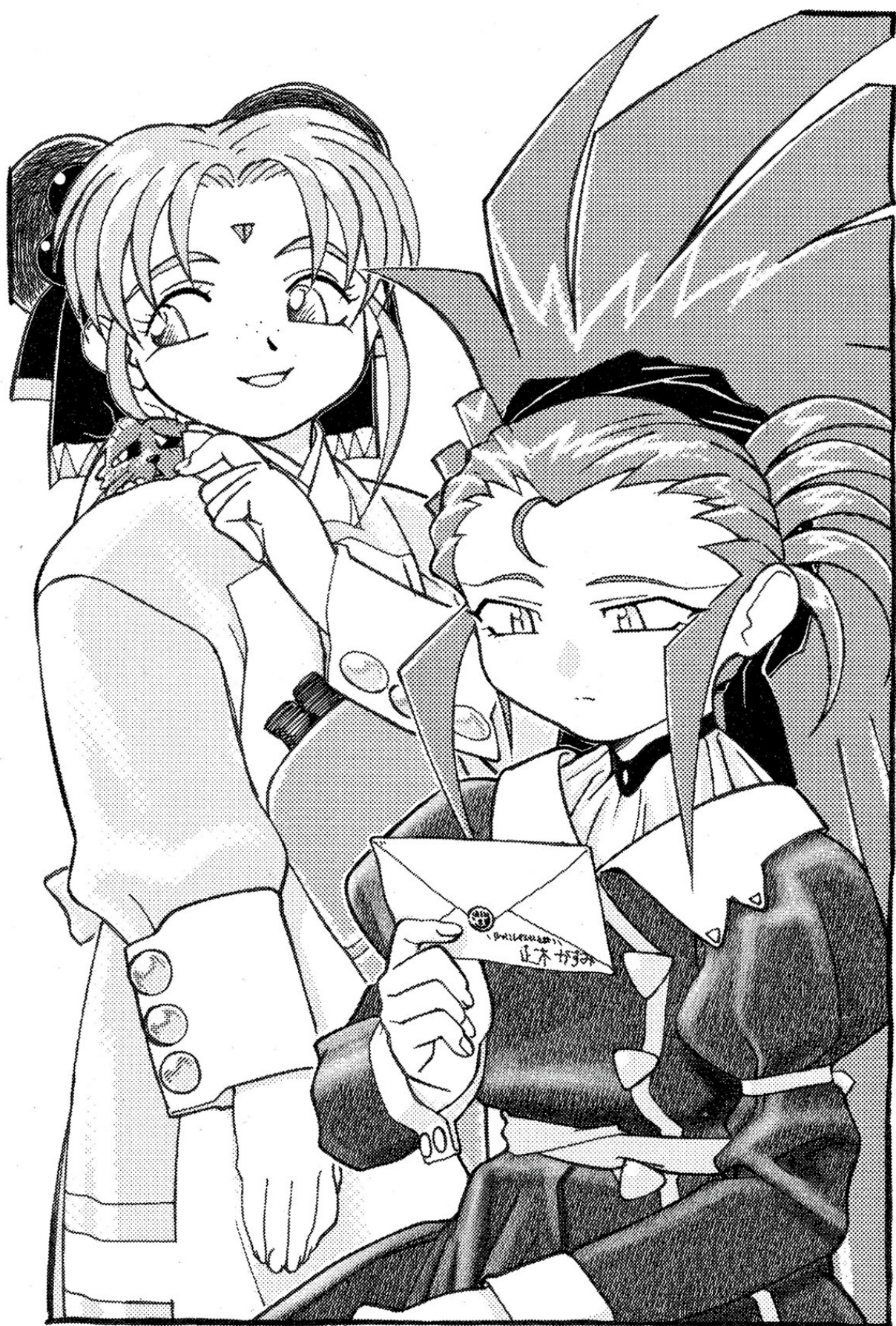
“What’s up? Seems a little early for lunch.” Touch-typing unerringly, Washu spoke to Sasami without looking away from the monitor.

“There’s a letter for you,” Sasami plainly stated without unnecessary detail. She knew from experience that was the best way to talk to Washu while she was absorbed in her research.

“A letter for me?” Washu’s fingers paused and she turned around, looking curiously at the envelope Sasami held out. After all, it was a regular paper envelope made on Earth. “I didn’t think I knew anybody on Earth with whom I would exchange correspondence.”

Written on the envelope, in beautiful penmanship, was the name *Hakubi Washu-sama*. Washu instantly ruled out any chance of the letter being a mistake or prank, considering her current environment and situation. The only possible sender was someone who knew that she was on Earth and who purposefully chose the old-fashioned Earth tradition of writing her a letter. There were plenty of people she knew who would be odd enough...or rather, *fanciful* enough...to do something so elaborate.

Washu flipped the envelope over. “Masaki...Kasumi? I wonder who that is...?” She understood that the name belonged to someone from Jurai, but she did not recognize it. It made perfect sense, of course, that the letter was from a Juraian. Information on what happened on Earth was under Jurai’s control, and there was practically no chance of other intelligence agencies getting their hands on the information. Not even the fact that the Emperor of Jurai and his two Empresses had visited Earth leaked to the outside world.



“The name uses different characters for ‘Masaki,’ but is it someone Tenchi-dono knows?”

“Oh! I bet that’s the name of Taro-chan’s mother!” Sasami cried out.

“...!!” As soon as Washu heard Taro’s name, she turned eyes of surprise and agitation to Sasami, which was very unusual for the usually-composed scientist. “Taro-chan’s...mother?”

“Definitely. Masaki is her last name.” Sasami said confidently, as she came to Washu’s side and peered at the envelope.

Kasumi, Taro’s mother, was Tenchi’s second cousin. Several months ago, she had been suddenly hospitalized for an illness, so the Masaki household had taken care of Taro for a time.

Ryoko, Tenchi, and the others were not used to handling babies, so Washu had looked after Taro... But it had reminded her of some bittersweet memories. If Taro’s mother had sent the letter, as Sasami said, it made sense that it was addressed to Washu. It was probably a thank you note.

“Mew...meow.” Someone else was also upset to hear Taro’s name: Ryo-Ohki. Perhaps she remembered being harassed while Taro was visiting. As soon as Sasami uttered the name, she reverted to cabbit form. She clung behind Sasami’s shoulder, rigid and nervous.

Sasami picked up the backpack that had dropped to the floor and gently petted Ryo-Ohki to reassure her. “It’s okay, Ryo-chan.”

“Meow.” Ryo-Ohki popped back into humanoid mode.

Washu turned with a gentle smile. “Thanks for the mail, Sasami-chan. I’ll read it later.”

“Huh? Oh...okay.” Sasami was a bit curious for news of Taro. She hadn’t been able to help care for him, since a number of things were troubling her at the time. She was very interested in the contents of Taro’s mother’s letter but could not bring herself to ask to read something addressed to Washu, so she reluctantly but cheerfully said, “I’ll call you when lunch is ready.” She took Ryo-Ohki’s hand to leave the room.

Ryo-Ohki, however, stiffened and would not move. She looked expectantly towards Washu.

“Ryo-chan?”

Washu, musing over the envelope, understood, petted her head, and said gently, “Thanks, Ryo-Ohki. I’ll be counting on you.”

“Meow.”

Washu made sure that Sasami and Ryo-Ohki were gone and then held the envelope in both hands. Her fingers froze, and she kept staring at it. A long period of silence ensued. She eventually closed her eyes, releasing a huge breath. Taking the envelope and standing up, she walked towards a different door than the one that continued to the Masaki house. The door opened silently, and the blowing breeze lightly ruffled Washu’s hair. Beyond the door was a park-like landscape surrounded by trees. Besides the trees, several different types of plants grew in cases of various sizes. It was more a botanical garden than a park.

Once through the door, Washu kicked lightly off from the ground. As casually as if she were skipping, she floated about ten inches off the ground without falling back down and soared through the air.

She could fly. Just like Ryoko, she could float through the air without mechanical assistance. It was hardly surprising, since she was Ryoko’s mother, but Washu made it a point not to use this ability in her daily life. She simply liked to walk. *It feels good, and it’s healthy to boot.* In fact, Washu had never shown the others that she could fly. If they had seen, their jaws would have dropped to the floor in surprise.

Well, that would be a sight to behold. Washu chuckled to herself, imagining their shocked faces. She wove her way between the trees. The place where she was going was quite a distance on foot. She could go there instantaneously if she used the door to the Masaki house, but she wanted to take her time today. She needed to prepare herself to read the letter.

After traveling several kilometers through the arboretum, a small building

appeared before Washu. Its door opened automatically as if to welcome her in. Inside, the view changed completely. All the walls and surfaces besides the floor—or perhaps windows?—showed pitch-black darkness. The cosmos stretched out in all directions.

Anyone stepping into this room for the first time would scream, feeling disorientation akin to being tossed into outer space. Washu entered the building as if drifting through zero gravity. Before her, five planets spread out in a gentle arc. The building she had entered was a large orbital elevator, and her “lab” was a large artificial satellite floating in space. It consisted of those five different types of planets, centered on the research satellite she had just been in. They orbited an existing star system, not something fixed in hyperspace. The lab was connected to the door in the Masaki house using a massive amount of energy.

One of Washu’s planets had an astronomical observatory. It was not very large, and not properly equipped, but it was a replica of the one Washu lived in long ago. An hour after she left her lab, Washu was in this old, disorganized room, sitting in an antique rocking chair. She always came here when she wanted to reflect alone upon the twenty thousand years of her vast life.

In the room was a dresser, decorated with several framed pictures. Washu’s attention was fixed on a picture of a baby with an innocent smile and large green eyes—the same as Washu’s. The eyes seemed to stare into Washu’s soul.

“Good grief. What was the matter with me...?” Washu remembered having to say goodbye to Taro and writhed in embarrassment. This was not something she could afford to have anyone witness. But she had allowed Tenchi to see something similar.

The time isn’t yet right for that. It was still too early to force a decision on Tenchi. There was an order to things. *Ryoko, Ayeka, Sasami, Mihoshi...heh...and Ryo-Ohki, maybe... Or are there more?* Swaying in the rocking chair, Washu removed the stationery paper from the envelope.

“Dear Hakubi Washu-sama,” the note began. It continued with words of

thanks and gratitude, describing how Taro was doing. It was polite but minimal, limited to the essential points. It was so generic that, at a glance, it seemed to be a courtesy letter, implying that Taro's mother was not even that grateful to have her child looked after. In actual fact, Washu was aware that this letter held an important meaning. Its familiar format was also used for reports at the Galaxy Academy.

"Hmm... I see. She's Tenchi-dono's family, after all. I got careless. It should've been obvious... Hm?"

The postscript stated, "Please, keep this secret from Tenchi-chan."

"Secret from Tenchi-dono...?" Washu murmured with a full heart. She glanced at the enclosed picture of Taro and his happy parents, and raised it to compare to the picture on the dresser. The distance between the two pictures was fate, and time. "I'm happy for you, Taro."

Right as Washu was about to put the letter away, Sasami's voice rang in the room out of nowhere.

"Washu-oneechan? It's time to eat."

"All right, I'll be right there."

Washu's lab was expansive. She usually worked on her research through simulations in the living room on the space station, but she periodically made her rounds to other places. Nobody would ever be able to find her at those times. That was why she had placed an intercom on the Masaki house door that connected directly to her. She did this partly because an unwitting trespasser would run into several dangerous pitfalls; the biggest reason, however, was as a countermeasure against Mihoshi. Washu had reason enough to be cautious.

By the time Washu arrived in the Masaki house's living room, everyone but Mihoshi was seated.

"You're late, Washu-oneechan."

"Sorry about that. I had some stuff to take care of," Washu apologized to Sasami, taking her seat. At the same moment, Mihoshi appeared in the door

Washu had just emerged from.

“Oh, Washu-san. Where have you been?” Mihoshi took her seat. Sasami looked at her skeptically.

Sasami never picked Mihoshi to fetch Washu from her lab. Since she was the Genius of Chance, Mihoshi’s coincidences always ended up fortuitous in the end. The problem was the process. When Washu was involved, for some reason, the coincidences often took the shape of chaos and destruction. No matter how favorable the results, getting that chaos under control after the fact was too much trouble to ever be worth it.

Of course, Mihoshi was careful in her way, so not everything she touched was exposed to the ferocity of her coincidences. But there were moments, after which something *always* broke or got out of hand because of Mihoshi.

This would not be a problem if the incidents were confined to the Masaki house. Ayeka pointlessly falling into the pond, for example, or something falling on Ryoko’s head, or the carrots Tenchi harvested rolling down the hill for a mile, or someone stepping on Ryo-Ohki’s tail, or a dish breaking, or a faucet breaking, or even a shuttle crashing to Earth and flooding the house... There were many options, but they were limited to the formulaic jokes commonly seen on sitcoms.

If something happened in Washu’s lab, however, it wouldn’t be easy to shrug off. Having Mihoshi summon Washu was like making a campfire to roast potatoes in an explosives factory, and Sasami would never do that.

Unfortunately, Mihoshi was not the type of person who sat there and did nothing until she was asked. She had helpfully gone to call Washu on her own.

Noticing Sasami’s concern, Washu smiled gently to reassure her. Sasami, relieved, started to serve the rice. “Mihoshi-dono...where were you looking?” Washu asked, knowing it was too late.

“Well...first...”

“Keep it short,” Washu remembered to add.

“Okay. Well...there were dark places and bright places, hot places...and cold places. Oh, thanks, Sasami.” Mihoshi paused to accept the bowl of rice Sasami

passed her.

Washu thanked Sasami internally for the quick thinking. Mihoshi's answer was always the same, and there was no point in asking. Washu had just set up the new anti-Mihoshi security system, and she decided to chalk this up to a test run. She would eventually find out what Mihoshi had done, and with more updates, a perfect anti-Mihoshi security system would be complete. A system that could handle the genius of coincidence—that singular perfection. *It'll be a bestseller for sure.* Many people would want one. But the first in line, cash in hand, would be the Galaxy Police.

After lunch, everyone was free to nap. Washu retreated to her lab, changed, and came out dressed to collect plant specimens. First, however, she headed towards Sasami, who was cleaning up in the kitchen.

"Sasami-chan...this was in that letter." Washu had noticed that Sasami was curious about the letter, and now gave her the picture of Taro with his parents. "Everyone's doing well. Taro's mother has gotten better and can return home."

"Really? That's great," Sasami smiled.

"Show that picture to the others. I have to go out."

"But it looks like it's going to rain." Sasami looked towards the window. Heavy clouds had rolled in.

"It's supposed to be sunny today! Well, I'll be fine." Washu waved, and headed out of the kitchen, towards the front door.

"Off to collect specimens?" Tenchi came down the stairs.

"Yeah...a few." Washu answered, feigning serenity. Internally, she remembered the letter and the picture, saying goodbye to Taro, and the words she had almost said to Tenchi. She tried desperately not to blush.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Washu opened the door to escape. A breeze, rather chilly for spring, swept in.

"It's like winter has come back, Washu...san." Ever since he saw Washu's tears

when they said goodbye to Taro, Tenchi sometimes addressed Washu using the “-san” honorific, rather than “-chan.” Washu did not comment. To her, Tenchi was not the past, but the future itself. “Will you be okay, dressed like that?”

“It’s fine. Besides, I’ll be right back.” To an outside observer, Tenchi *seemed* to be an older brother concerned about his little sister. But Washu’s tone was full of affection, more like a mother with a son anxious about house-sitting. Tenchi noticed that tone, blushed, and looked away. “See you later, Tenchi-dono,” she said gently and walked off towards the mountains.

Tenchi watched her for a while, shivered at the incoming chill, and looked up at the sky. Cold white flakes came fluttering down and melted into drops of water against his warm cheek. “It’s snow.” He gazed at the increasing flurries for a while. Suddenly growing concerned, he looked in the direction Washu had walked off. “Washu-san, it’s snowing...” But, as if she had melted into the snow, Washu was gone.

“It’s coming down hard, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t usually stick like this.” Ayeka and Tenchi watched the snow fall, murmuring. In south Okayama, where they lived, it occasionally snowed but rarely accumulated. Snowfall would melt the next day at the latest.

“Is Washu-oneechan going to be okay...?” asked Sasami, folding the laundry she had brought inside.

“That cold-blooded witch will be fine. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was the one making it snow in the first place,” spat Ryoko, tears swimming in her eyes. She had just finished volume nineteen of *Checking In ☆ On You*, which was a turbulent mess of climaxing storylines.

“That would make her the Snow Queen,” said Tenchi, appalled.

“That’s Ryoko-san’s mother, after all,” Ayeka casually teased, triggering an immediate glare in reaction from Ryoko.

To avoid getting involved, Sasami and Tenchi headed for the sofa area with tea and snacks. Mihoshi was already there. She took a rice cracker from Tenchi’s box of snacks. Stuffing her mouth, she asked, “Henhihan, whaff a

Fwow Kween?”

“Please ask again after you’ve swallowed.”

Gulp! “Tenchi-san, what’s a Snow Queen?”

“Oh...she’s a character in folk tales. A winter apparition who lives on snowy mountains. She can manipulate snow and ice.” Tenchi told Mihoshi the gist of the tale, but, since he was not well-versed in the story, made things up here and there. Sasami and Mihoshi sat and listened, riveted. Fairy tales from Earth were new to them.

“That was interesting. There’s a story like that on my planet, too.”

“Really, Mihoshi-oneechan?”

“She’s making things up. Don’t lead people on, Mihoshi.” Ryoko, who had bailed on the standoff with Ayeka, floated above them. Ayeka, left behind, looked at her grumpily, then gave up and joined the conversation.

“Whaaat? But my great-grandmother said she saw her when she was little!” Mihoshi shrank back at Ryoko’s glare.

“Are you sure?” Ryoko demanded.

“I think so...”

Sasami and Ryo-Ohki came between them. “Mihoshi-oneechan, tell us the story of the Snow Queen! Ryo-chan, you want to hear it, too, right?”

“Meow!”

“I’d love to hear it as well.” The vote from Tenchi settled it. Everyone sat around to listen to Mihoshi’s story. They couldn’t work in the fields because of the snow, and the gloomy light made the atmosphere perfect for ghost stories.

“Okay, then...”

“Hold on,” Ryoko interrupted. Ignoring Ayeka’s teasing, she closed the curtains, lit candles to intensify the mood, and plunked a bottle of sake next to her. “Okay, I’m ready. You may begin, Mihoshi.”

“Uh, Ryoko, I’m not telling a ghost story or anything.” Mihoshi remembered the hullabaloo over the supposed ghost at the hot springs resort run by Tenchi’s

relatives and made a pitiful, reluctant face. It was hard to blame her, as she had passed out from fear during that incident.

“Just get started already.”

“O-okay...” Mihoshi cleared her throat, paused, and started to talk quietly. “The planet Seniwa, where I was born, is covered in snow for almost half the year, even close to the equator.” Her voice was low, and she used it well for emphasis. Although she was the biggest scaredy-cat, she joined in the fun when people gathered, despite her complaints. “My great-grandmother had a stepbrother from her parents’ remarriage. He was six months older. She married him when she grew up, had my grandmother, and then...”

“We don’t care about your family tree, you idiot. Just get to the story!” Ryoko yelled, already drunk.

“I-I’m so sorry!” Misplaced attention to detail was very characteristic of Mihoshi. “Well, this story I’m about to tell you happened when my great-grandfather was five years old, and my great-grandmother was four.”

She spoke matter-of-factly, and the others listened intently. The snow continued to fall.

There was a room in a palatial mansion that was full of large antiques. The stately furnishings were austere and without embellishments, but experts would have recognized the materials as remarkably extravagant. The room looked subdued, but the shoes, clothes, and toys indicated that its resident was a child and not an adult. That child was sleeping in the large bed in the center of the room. She was lovely, with brown skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. She seemed to have a cold and sometimes coughed painfully. A woman, apparently her mother, sat by her bedside, knitting with a practiced hand.

Knock knock. The mother noticed the reserved knocking and looked up towards the door. “Come in.”

The thick wooden door opened at her voice. A boy peered in. His pale skin and green eyes contrasted with the woman’s and the girl’s.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mother...how’s Miyuki?” It was obvious at a glance that the woman and boy were not biological relatives. The only thing they had in common was their beautiful blond hair.

“She’s fine. The fever’s gone down, and she’ll be good to go in a couple more days.” The mother looked at the boy kindly.

“Oniichama...” the girl whispered.

The boy began to approach, but the mother raised her hand to stop him.

“No! If you get this cold, too, it’ll be even longer before you can play together.”

“All right...” He cast his eyes downward.

The mother gently admonished him. “It’s getting late. You should get to bed.”

“I will... Good night, Mother. Get better soon, Miyuki.” He was about to close the door, when something outside caught his eye, if only for a moment. It was a human silhouette.

“What’s the matter?”

“I thought I saw someone outside the window...” As he spoke, the mother swiftly moved towards the window he pointed at. She did not intend to frighten the children, but the way she carried herself betrayed her military training. She peered out the window from the shadows and confirmed that the security system was functional.

This house belonged to one of the country’s leading families—perhaps even the *most* powerful in the country. They were equipped with a tight, multilayered security system for protection. Since the alarm did not sound, there should be no intruder... But the mother was clearly wary of something. Having confirmed that there were no malfunctions, she turned back towards the boy. “It’s all right... There’s nothing there. It must be a snow fairy who came to look for you, since you two weren’t outside playing. So you better work on getting better.”

Her soothing voice allayed the boy’s unease. “You’re right... Good night, Miyuki. Good night, Mother.”

The mother watched him leave the room and sat down by the girl's side again. The little girl's face was twisted in sadness. She missed the boy.

"You'll be able to play again when you get over your cold." The girl nodded, on the verge of tears. "Do you like him that much?" The mother teased the girl as if she was talking to her friend and not her daughter.

"You know what...? When I grow up, I'm going to marry him." The girl half-hid her face in her blanket while she talked, embarrassed, and then covered her whole head.

"Is that so? Wouldn't that be nice," the mother murmured, somewhat sadly. The pure white snow showed no signs of stopping and continued to fall, as if it intended to smother everything...

The snow had stopped the next day, which was rare during that season. Reflected in the white crystals, the sunlight almost seemed to be dancing. The girl watched the charming sight from her bed. She had gone to sleep early the night before and therefore woke up at quite an early hour, too. Bored, and not knowing what to do, she sat up, feeling somewhat better. She glanced out the window and saw someone running in the snow. A boy was playing with a ball on the frozen ground.

"Oniichama...that's not fair..." The girl got out of bed to go after him, but then imagined the worried look on her mother's face, and quietly followed the boy with her gaze instead. Even from a distance, she could tell he was having a lot of fun. He had been cooped up for days, frustrated that he could not run as fast as he wanted when the girl was with him. Now, he ran quickly and furiously after the ball. He could kick it even farther, and run faster. Faster.

The girl watched him get farther and farther away, and an unspeakable anxiety suddenly welled up inside her. She felt like he was going to disappear into the snow, just like that.

The boy kicked the ball high. He ran after it, watching it rise in an arc in the blue sky. "Oh..." Running into a sudden plume of powdery snow, he stopped. He was buffeted by the wind swirling around him. In a few seconds, it passed. He opened his eyes and saw that the fallen ball had rolled close by. He went to go

get it and then noticed a woman standing beside it.

“...!!” The boy stiffened, vigilant. This woman had appeared out of nowhere in the middle of a clearing, after all. *I have to run away*, he thought instinctively. This whole area was the property of his house. A stranger would not be out here alone without an escort. Since he was born privileged, he was taught as a matter of course that some people would try to make contact for ulterior motives, especially malicious ones. Although young, he knew what to do. *Activate the Guardian System...and then...* he thought, but did not move. He only stared at her.

An otherworldly beauty with striking red hair, dressed in black... What held his attention were her eyes, the same green as his. He did not feel afraid. On the contrary, he felt nostalgic. *I know this person. I know her...*

The woman picked the ball up and approached. “Is this yours, little boy?”

He shivered at her regal voice, almost moved to tears. If he shifted even a little bit, perhaps the tears would spill out. He could not move a step until she was right in front of him. With a gentle smile, she held out the ball. He took it, still staring into her eyes. “Thank...you,” he managed to stammer, then, as though he was coming to his senses, the nervousness binding him vanished. Was it because their hands brushed when he took the ball from her? Surprise remained on the boy’s face, but he was no longer wary.

Another pair of eyes watched them from the bushes a short distance away. It was the girl, who had snuck out of bed. She had spotted them, but for some reason, she could not call out to them.

Her mother treated the boy no differently, but even to the girl’s naive eyes, there was something off in their relationship. But this woman and the boy stood there together, perfectly natural, as if they used to be a single entity.

She’s the Snow Queen...

The girl remembered a bedtime story her mother told. A beautiful woman, shocked by the death of her child, disappeared into the snowy mountains. Without a body, she was a soul adrift, continuing to search for her child, who was no more. It was the tragic tale of a spirit who kidnapped children she saw playing alone.

From the girl's position, she could not tell what they were talking about, but it was clear they were enjoying each other's company. She could only watch.

"...?!!" She noticed that something had changed. There was no sound of the wind or rustling trees. A hushed silence fell around them.

The woman reached out to the boy. The boy did not resist. He did not know what they had been talking about, but he knew that he wanted to take her outstretched hand. He reached back.

The Snow Queen is going to take Oniichama away... The girl had a gut feeling. She tried to stop him, but her voice would not emerge, as if time had stopped for everyone besides the woman and the boy. *She's going to take him away.* No matter how the girl panicked, she could not move one finger. The sadness brought tears to her eyes. *She's going to take him away...*

The moment the woman and her brother's hands were about to touch, warm tears streaked the girl's cheeks.

"Oniichama!!"

In that moment, time, which had been frozen in place, began to tick forward again. The boy came back to his senses at the girl's cry. The desire to take the woman's hand vanished, and he turned around. The girl stood there, wearing only a shawl over her nightclothes.

"Miyuki!" The boy, surprised, ran to the girl.

"Oniichama."

"Mother told you to stay in bed." He gallantly threw his cape over her.

"Oniichama!" The girl clung to him and turned to the woman, practically daring her to take him. But then, she noticed the deep sorrow in the woman's eyes, which dissolved her intense anger. "I-I'm sor..." Equally intense remorse now welled up inside her. "I-I'm sor..." She kept trying to say the words, but the sound would not come out.

"Miyuki-sama! Miyuki-sama!!" Two guards rushed over, having come to search for the missing girl, and raised their guns to protect the children from the suspicious woman. The woman continued to calmly regard the children.

Still clutching the boy, the girl could not avert her eyes. "...I'm sorry..." She whispered, her voice breaking and her face tear stained. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she finally managed to say, and buried her face in the boy's shoulder to avoid the woman's eyes. She repeated the phrase like an incantation. "I'm sorry..."

"I'm not angry at you..." The boy, thinking the words were meant for him, hugged the girl and gently patted her head.

"I'm sorry." The girl did not want to see the woman's eyes anymore. She was afraid. She knew that if she looked into this stranger's eyes, she would not be able to stop the boy from leaving with her.

The second one of the guards touched the woman to take hold of her, a powerful wind whipped around them. For a moment, everything turned white—perhaps along with the emotions of everyone present.

Goodbye, dear boy... The girl heard the woman's voice clearly through the billowing wind.

"...?!" The girl flinched and, raising her face, saw the woman smile at her. Her red hair danced in the wind, and she had the same gentle green eyes as the girl's brother. Then the woman vanished into the snow.

The guards brought the girl back with the boy, and, exactly as she expected, she was scolded by her worried mother. Since she had gone outside just as she was getting over her cold, she ended up on bed rest for another week. The boy also caught a cold, and they were laid up side by side. The girl held the boy's hand as he panted restlessly through his illness.

"Oniichama... Oniichama... Oniichama..." Thoughts swirled endlessly in her mind. Feeling the warmth of her brother's hand, she relived the day. The woman must have been the Snow Queen. A kind, sorrowful apparition. A beautiful red-haired spirit of snow who let her have her brother back...

"Mihoshi-oneechan, what happened to the Snow Queen?" Sasami asked innocently.

“Nobody ever saw her again.”

“Is that so?”

“Heh, who knows? She could’ve been nearby this whole time...” Ryoko said in a low voice, threatening Mihoshi.

“Huh? Come on, don’t scare me like that...”

“Seriously, she’s...right behind you!!” The moment Ryoko said that, the window opened, the snowstorm swirled inside, and a figure with red hair silhouetted against the sky appeared.

At this well-timed entrance, followed by Mihoshi’s bloodcurdling screech, everyone jumped up, screaming. “Th-the Snow Queen!!”

“Wait! Don’t leave meeee!” Paralyzed with fright, Mihoshi crawled across the floor, bawling.

“Mihoshi!” A snow-covered figure grabbed Mihoshi by the collar.

“Eek! Save me!!” Mihoshi frantically screamed.

“Mihoshi!!” The snowy figure yelled in her ear.

“That voice...is that...Washu...chan?” Tenchi was the first to notice, but soon, everyone besides Mihoshi realized that the “Snow Queen” was Washu.

Washu’s angry voice and Tenchi’s words did not reach Mihoshi, as she was the only one still crying and screaming. “Please, spare me! I won’t tell anyone! Although I guess I just did...!!”

“Quiet!!” Washu, exasperated, bonked Mihoshi on the head, something she rarely did.

“Oww! What was that for, Miss Snow Queen...?!” Mihoshi took a long, hard look. “Oh... Washu...san?” Her ability to think returned, and she recognized the person standing before her as Washu. She let out a sigh of relief. “I’m so glad... I thought you were the Snow Queen...”

“Mihoshi-dono...” Washu grabbed her by the collar, brought her close, and glared at her. When Washu was mad, she looked even scarier than the Snow Queen.

“Wh-what’s the matter? Why the scary face...?”

“Do you really think I could smile when I almost got lost in a blizzard?”

“Oh, dear, that sounds terrible.” Mihoshi was slow on the uptake.

Washu’s face twitched. She should have known that beating around the bush never worked with Mihoshi. Feeling drained, she switched to a specific line of questioning. “What did you do in my room when you went to look for me?” This time, she did not tell Mihoshi to be brief.

Mihoshi started to talk. She had an excellent memory and could explain everything she did in great detail. “Well, first, Sasami-chan was preparing lunch. The menu was tender stem broccolini in broth and simmered potatoes, which Ryoko stole a taste of this morning, and I was thinking that they must be getting so tender just about now, soaking up the broth enough to fall apart... Oh, and I smelled fish and daikon stewed in sweet soy...”

“That’s enough of the lunch menu.”

“Huh? Okay...and I figured it was about time to call everyone over, so I went to open that door to your laboratory... Oh, I knocked three times, of course, and called your name three times, but you didn’t answer, so I went inside... Then it was pitch-black, and I turned around and the door wasn’t there, and I completely lost my bearings, so I got nervous and cried a little. Tee-hee! But I trusted my instincts as a Galaxy Police officer and looked for the exit, and it was still dark, but it got very hot... Oh, I forgot to say that I heard a bush warbler. Their song is so calming and elegant and reminiscent of spring...

“Anyway,” Mihoshi continued, “it was so hot that I started to sweat, and I tried to take some clothes off, but I tripped on my pants and fell over. It’s so true that you see stars when you hit your head... Oh, before I took my clothes off, I thought you might be around, so I called your name three times, but I still didn’t hear an answer... I picked up my clothes, because I shouldn’t leave things behind. Aaand then the floor was very slippery, so I tripped three more times. I hurt my knee, elbow, and the back of my head, so I cried a little bit. Tee-hee!

“But I’m an officer, so I mustered my courage and got back up. Aren’t I great? Oh, then I called your name three times again, but I still didn’t hear an answer. Instead, I heard a click from my right, and then there was what sounded like an

animal growling from my left... I got scared and I ran, but I tripped three more times, and cried... Oh, but I didn't forget to keep calling your name. Three times. Then I was anxious, and I was hoping I'd hear the warbler again, so I called the warbler three times. Then I figured I should call your name, so that was three more times..."

Mihoshi's ability to recall was extraordinary, but she did not have the ability to organize those memories. As a result, her reports left not only Jurai, but also the GP in confusion. That was the reason why, earlier, Washu had told her to be brief. This time, for the sake of figuring out what Mihoshi had done, she could not.

Two hours later...

"I got tired of walking, so I sat down to take a rest... Then..."

"Hold on a sec. What exactly did you sit on?"

"Um, well... I think the number 108384788298 was on it."

"I see." Washu had patiently listened to Mihoshi's endless story for hours. Now, she had finally heard the source of the trouble. She picked up Mihoshi with a smile, slid open the window, and threw her out into the heap of snow. Tossed with a strength that belied Washu's apparent age, Mihoshi landed face-first in the deep snow, about eight meters away.

"Aiieee! Wh-what are you doing?!" Flailing about, Mihoshi made things worse for herself.

"Hmph!" Washu lightly harrumphed at the sight, slammed the window shut, and locked it for good measure. "Good grief... She scrambled the weather controller, and somehow, only for this valley..."

"Washu-san, please open up!" Mihoshi implored, banging on the window, which Washu ignored. The others watched, and though they cast sympathetic glances at Mihoshi, they did not dare open the window.

Washu activated her terminal and started to tinker with the weather control. She turned to the others. "Oh...so, I heard you yelling that I was the Snow

Queen. But what were you all doing with the curtains closed?"

Sasami briefed her about Mihoshi's story.

"I see..." Washu replied curtly, although she was the one who asked for the information, and continued working without another word.

"Um... Washu-sama?" After a while, Ayeka nervously spoke to Washu, pointing to Mihoshi, who was on the verge of tears on the other side of the window. Seeing Washu continue to ignore her, Ayeka fell silent without another word. Tenchi and Sasami did likewise.

"That should do it for now...!!" Finished, Washu turned her terminal off, briefly stretched, and finally turned her attention to the window.

"I'm soooooorry! I'm soooooorry!" Mihoshi was plastered to the window, her nose red from the cold, repeating her apology over and over in tears. "I'm soooooorry! I'm soooooorry!" Washu stared at Mihoshi, dumbfounded. "I'm soooooorry! I'm soooooorry! I'm soooooorry..."



Tenchi and Sasami noticed Washu's body trembling slightly. Then a chuckle came out. "Heh heh..." Washu slowly started to laugh. "Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Bursting out laughing, Washu opened the window and hugged Mihoshi.

"Whaat?!" Unable to brace herself against the sudden onslaught, Mihoshi lost her balance and fell into the snow with Washu.

"You're just so cute! Darn you! ♥" Washu rolled in the snow, swinging Mihoshi around.

"Is her brain frozen?" At that, Ryoko's face was suddenly covered in white powder. Washu had thrown a snowball at her. "Why, you...!!" Falling easily for Washu's provocation, she leapt outside.

"Yay! Me too!"

"Meow!" Sasami and Ryo-Ohki followed.

"Wait, Sasami...!" *Wapf!* Ryoko's snowball hit Ayeka. "R-Ryoko-san!" Ayeka squared her shoulders and also leapt out into the yard. Another snowball hit Tenchi. Since nobody knew who they were throwing at, the snowball fight turned into a big free-for-all.

Washu, throwing snowballs, looked sidelong at Mihoshi. *"I'm sorry," she says... You look just like her, little girl.* Just then, Ryoko hit her with a snowball. Washu sank into the snow, laughing. *So, she thought to herself, it's been twenty thousand years...*

This time, Mihoshi's coincidences included the discovery of a disconnected circuit that had gotten too old and a bug in one of the weather programs. Neither was too serious. And, on the way to the weather controller, Washu found a manga volume she had left behind and forgotten about.

"Hey! I should've known Washu took it!" It was the last volume of *Checking In ☆ On You*. Ryoko snatched the manga from Washu, looked lovingly at it, and leapt on top of the crossbeams.

"Okay, good for you," Washu mumbled weakly, watching Ryoko happily read her manga.

Washu

Tens of thousands of years ago, Earth time...

The power relationships in the galaxy were different back then. There were no connections between allied powers through the Galactic Federation, and tens of thousands of small coalitions existed, ranging in size from single planets to several solar systems. With interstellar travel routes still underdeveloped, the vast expanse of space rendered wars between nations pointless. There were territorial skirmishes between neighboring countries, but most societies focused on pioneering the unexplored frontier. That was the Age of Galactic Exploration.

The rise and fall of countless civilizations continued to spread intelligent life throughout the galaxy. Eventually, there were two major powers: an alliance centered around Jurai, the largest by far among the coalitions, and a coalition centered around Seniwa.

Since those two alliances possessed outstanding technology enabling interstellar travel, they were capable of becoming driving forces that could form a galactic federation. Unfortunately, the two nations were locked in an endless cold war. Also, even with their technology, Jurai and Seniwa were both small compared to the entirety of colonized space. Neither had sufficient assets or territory to catalyze a federation independently.

There was also another factor obstructing the relationship between the two countries: space pirates.

“Thanks, mister!” Easily carrying a paper bag almost as big as her upper body, a red-haired girl emerged from a grocery store. She set down the goods she had just bought on the rack on the back of her air scooter and rolled up her baggy shirtsleeves. Her outfit seemed quite large for a girl her size. Just as she straddled the seat, about to press the ignition switch, her surroundings suddenly turned dark, as if the sun had been blotted out by the clouds. The

girl's eyes had been acclimated to the sunlight, and, given the abruptness of the dimming, she had the impression that night had suddenly fallen. She reflexively looked up into the sky, and a powerful light shown into her eyes. Whatever had cast the shadow had already moved.

The girl clicked her tongue at her carelessness, blocked the direct sunlight with her hand, and slowly scanned the sky. A ship was silently flying overhead at a low altitude. It was a peculiar vessel with an outer hull carved out of wood. As expansive as the galaxy may be, only one planet used ships made of wood.

"A Royal Ship," the girl muttered, with deep emotion and awe.

"Well, well, the Royal Ship... A crusade must be happening." From behind the girl came a shopkeeper's voice. Looking up at the sky, he added in vexation, "Those pirates are like locusts. They swarm back as soon as you drive them away."

They were on Kanamitsu, a massive food production planet located in the remote regions of Jurai's territory, with fertile lands for agriculture and plentiful oceans for a thriving fishing industry. Because it was so far out, and because of the abundant food resources, Kanamitsu was often attacked by pirates and other nations. In recent years, with the changes in territory-power relationships, it had become an important base for supplying border security forces. Therefore, a Third Generation Royal Ship piloted by an Imperial Family member was permanently stationed there. With the presence of a single Third Generation ship, Kanamitsu gained the strength of a large nation's central planet. Now guarded by a Royal Ship, the planet's risk of being pillaged by individual pirates and the odd organization was gone, but battles with large-scale pirate syndicates continued unchanged.

"If the Royal Ship is coming out, it must be Shank's people," sighed the girl.

"We've been marked by an onerous foe," said the shopkeeper in response. However powerful, a single ship could not defend an entire planet. Having only one ship in a fleet surpass the others in power was inefficient, especially if that ship needed to secure a wide area. The common Jurai warrior boasted tremendous strength, but during combat, the attacking pirates held the upper hand.

“Something must be done,” murmured the girl, watching the Royal Ship, which was now the size of a grain of rice in the sky. Strife brought about more strife and generated misery for the people. The girl’s voice suggested that she had experienced that firsthand. Or, at least, the shopkeeper beside her got that feeling. “Watching them forever won’t do a thing. I better get going.”

“Hold on... I came out to give you this. Sorry, these are just samples, but give ‘em to the kids.”

The girl peered inside the large paper sack he handed her, which contained a variety of snacks and candy. “Thanks, as always.” She placed the sack on the rack behind her. “I better hurry. Later, mister.”

The girl started the scooter, which was quite small, but cumbersome for a girl who only looked seven or eight. In fact, she did not appear old enough to legally have a license. But the shopkeeper and other passersby only offered her friendly banter, and no one chastised her for underage driving.

Just then, a car pulled up alongside her. A car made out of hardened wood: a Jurai security vehicle. “Washu-chan, you gotta be over sixteen to ride a scooter,” an officer said from the window, smiling.

“Oops, sorry!” A moment later, the girl transformed into an eighteen-year-old. This was why she had been wearing baggy clothing. However, her clothes could not adequately cover her newly ample body, and her shoulders remained bare. “Heh, how’s that?” In a complete change from her earlier innocence, she smiled bewitchingly in the guard’s direction.

Her name was Hakubi Washu, and she had inexplicable powers. In this age, the existence of people with such abilities was common knowledge, but those who possessed them usually hid them. In Washu’s case, she used them liberally. The town residents accepted her without a second thought.

“I’ve never seen your partner before. A rookie?” She tapped the window, calling attention to the officer, who had not been keeping his eyes on the road.

“Huh? Oh...yeah, from the Jurai home world.” Even the officer who knew her was captivated by her; the rookie next to him looked as though his soul had been yanked from his body. “S-say, let’s go on a date.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Your son in our day care proposed to me the other day.”

“What?! That brat... All right, marry me.”

“Don’t be silly. Your wedding vows said you would only have one wife. Get on with your patrol, champion of justice. Scram.” Washu kicked the door a little aggressively.

“C’mon, no harm done.” The officer sped up. As the car pulled away, the rookie inside kept looking behind him, even after Washu’s face was no longer visible.

Finally freed from her gravitational pull, he sighed and muttered, “Senpai, she was really beautiful. There aren’t many beauties like *that* on Jurai.”

“Too bad you weren’t transferred earlier. What a shame.” The older guard frowned with a sidelong glance.

“What? But you have a wife...”

“That’s not what I mean. You saw her dump us.”

“Then does she have a boyfriend? She must...”

“No, she doesn’t have anyone. She’s going to study abroad in a few days, at the Imperial Academy.”

“She got accepted to the Imperial Academy?! Is she from a rich family?”

“The day care my son goes to is also an orphanage. We’re near the border, so there are a lot of battles... What I mean is, she’s the other kind of student.” The older guard lightly tapped his head with his finger.

Students at the Imperial Academy were either from wealthy families or exempt from tuition. “A beauty *and* smart? That’s amazing.”

“Yeah...*too* amazing.”

“Huh...?”

“She got accepted to the Department of Philosophy.”

“Philosophy?!” With a surprised cry of grief, the rookie fell silent. Philosophy was the greatest of all Jurai’s sciences. It was a symbol of the power supporting

Jurai, along with the Royal Trees. The scientific knowledge and technologies formulated and collected at the Academy were, in and of themselves, merely components, and rarely had direct applications. However, once an unexpected connection between fields was made, technology could advance in explosive leaps and bounds. The Philosophy Department was often the source of those connections, having come up with a plethora of revolutionary applications. It also had another important role: the creation of ethical standards in technology. Thanks to their vast store of knowledge and experience, someone qualified as an assistant philosophy professor or better would receive treatment equivalent to a head of state, not only on Jurai, but in other countries as well. They enjoyed VIP treatment from the minute they got their letter of acceptance.

“Philosophy...” The rookie muttered in disappointment. He realized that, although he’d fallen in love at first sight, she had already gone where he could not follow.

Washu parked the air scooter on a small hill in front of the orphanage, stretched, and looked out at the landscape. A golden carpet of grain awaiting harvest spread before her as far as the eye could see.

“Washu-oneechan! Bye!” A little girl being led by her mother waved to Washu. As Washu turned around, the mother nodded and smiled.

“Take care. See you tomorrow.” Washu waved and saw them off and then turned back towards the city that faced the farm. What looked like strings far off in the distance were orbital elevators, heading to the spaceport in geosynchronous orbit. In a few days, she was going to depart from there, headed for the planet that housed the Imperial Academy. She would have to say goodbye to this landscape as well.

“It’s not like I’ll never be able to see it again...” She laughed at herself for getting a bit sentimental, climbed onto the scooter, and pressed the ignition switch.

In the orphanage, ten children waited for Washu’s return. “Washu-oneechan,

welcome back!”

“What did you get us, Washu-oneechan?”

“Washu-oneechan, did you get us the candy you promised?”

The children thronged and clung to Washu, calling her name in turn. Washu used the shopkeeper’s bag of sweets as bait to distract them and ran inside with the rest of the bags.



“Just like a mother bird tending to her chicks, Washu-chan?” said the director of the orphanage, who was like a mother to all of them.

“I think of them as fish in a fish farm, Mother.” Like carp, swarming and gaping near the surface. A precise, unemotional way to put it, typical of Washu.

The ladies in the kitchen, a little ways away, burst out laughing. But the director continued to address Washu coolly. “I suppose we won’t get to see this sight for much longer...”

Fifteen years ago, Washu had been found in front of that orphanage. She had been standing there without expression, neither searching for her parents nor crying. “Bathed in light that streamed between the clouds as they parted after the rain, you were like a child sent from heaven. It was like a dream,” the director reminisced.

Young Washu had actually been levitating when found. Despite this, the ESP test conducted before she was taken in by the orphanage was inconclusive. It had been raining, but she was not wet. The director who found her wondered if her parents were still nearby and gathered information from the networks throughout the town, but could not find any clues. Even more strangely, nobody had even seen Washu arrive or make her way through town. Since then, the director had tried every possible recourse but had never uncovered Washu’s background. The only thing Washu had carried were three red spheres. However, these were determined to be plain crystal spheres with nothing unusual about them, unrelated to Washu’s parentage.

“If that had been reported to Jurai’s Central Lab through the network, things might’ve turned out differently,” Washu muttered under her breath.

A few years after Washu was taken in by the orphanage, people began to report sightings of girls who looked like her, but of all different ages. A child listening to some adults discussing it had to tell them that they were *all* Washu. Her friends had already known: Washu had the ability to transform her body. The Kanamitsu government, when it found out, made her undergo another ESP test, and she was rated C: not very powerful.

Some people were suspicious of her ability, but that was not a major problem. What everyone called attention to was her superior intellect. She completed

the basic curriculum, which normally took a decade, in just four years. By fifteen, she had completed the basic requirements for the Academy and received a special scholarship to attend the Jurai Imperial Academy without taking the entrance exam. As a result of aptitude tests, she decided to join the Department of Philosophy.

Washu's admission was deferred until she reached age eighteen to allow her psychological maturation. In the meantime, she exchanged private communications with Academy professors and even published several papers.

Her eighteenth birthday was in one week. That was the day she would receive permission to attend the Imperial Academy.

In one corner of the astronomical observatory which was built on the orphanage's roof, there was a space divided by a simple partition. This was Washu's room. Of course, the entire observatory was basically her room. It was crammed with specimens, experimental instruments, and books that were now antique props. It was as disorganized as an attic in an old mansion; she had not tidied up, even though she was moving out soon. She did not need to: the books and specimens had been converted to data files, and she was leaving everything other than the few items of clothing she would need immediately. Now that she was a special scholarship student, the Academy would cover the cost of her necessities and luxuries.

Washu rolled over in bed, watching the sky beyond the window. "The highest seat of learning... I better keep my cover up."

She opened her hand and looked at the three jewels she held. "I'm going to *do* research, not *be* researched." Her final goal was to investigate her own origins and that of these three jewels.

A C-class psychic and ordinary crystal spheres, so why...? The answer was simple: the methods used so far were unable to uncover the truth.

A large bottle, discreetly placed in a corner of the room, held darkness and small points of light. Upon closer inspection, each point of light was clearly a galaxy. It was not a hologram but a real universe. Washu had created it with knowledge she gained from the basic curriculum. At the time, given her young age, she could not understand the momentous significance of the act. Later, she

understood the true depths of her abilities and perceived that the three jewels concealed even stronger power. But despite her current knowledge, she could not figure out the jewels' true nature.

"Knowledge won't give me the answer. But..." If she released her latent abilities, she knew it would be possible to find out immediately. She would also find out who she was. But she nixed that idea.

Something within Washu spoke to her: *That would only repeat the same thing all over again.*

"Repeat what...?" She asked herself. "What am I?" Ever since she had discovered the meaning of her power, she had been seeking further knowledge. She wanted to find out more about herself through knowledge, not by using her powers. As if that was her goal...

She jumped at the "Ping!" from the terminal on top of her desk, which heralded an e-mail's arrival. The pop-up in the corner of her monitor displayed an odd icon. It was from Professor Ikuma, the chairman of the Imperial Academy Philosophy Department. What looked like a child's doodle was Prof. Ikuma's personal icon, drawn, in fact, by his own young daughter.

"A program is like a picture..." The e-mail contained his boilerplate signature, along with a compressed file. When she extracted the file, data poured in.

"Wh-what is this...? It's huge." Washu stared, astounded, at the data scrolling through her monitor. Fragments of information stimulated her mind. One piece of information was a single color. Through combining, mixing, and spreading, it took shape. She could see it: the light. Suddenly, her expression became grim. "What's *this...?!?*"

"Washu-chan, you should come down soon." The sun had long set by the time the director called up from the floor below to Washu, who was still looking over Ikuma's data file.

"Coming!" Looking away, Washu went downstairs with an airy gait.

"We're going to be busy, starting tomorrow."

“Urk...” Washu paused at the director’s words. She followed him with a heavy sigh, as if the wind had left her sails. She was fine with being busy getting ready to depart for the Academy. But the director was talking about farewell parties. Now that she had been admitted to the Department of Philosophy, her calendar was scheduled down to the minute with press conferences, interviews, and meetings, many spawning from ulterior motives.

“Mother...I...” she called reproachfully, and the director returned a gentle smile.

“Everyone wants to say goodbye to you.” The director was sincere. She had the patience of a saint. Of course, everyone around her had to suffer for it as well. “You are my pride and joy, Washu.” Her smile robbed Washu of the willpower to object but also gave her unaccountable strength. Without that strength, Washu might not have been able to reach this point.

“I guess it can’t be helped...” Washu straightened up and headed to the dining hall, where her dear fish farm awaited.

A week later, Washu departed for the Jurai Imperial Academy amid a grand send-off from Kanamitsu senior government officials and financial organizations. After boarding, Washu was introduced to the shuttle’s captain and crew, and the bodyguards she would have until she reached the Academy. She found the officer she knew among the guards, raised her hand, and smiled. Seeing a familiar face, she felt more at ease.

A private, first-class suite had been prepared for her. She was led by her designated flight attendant to a room used only by heads of state and upper-class society. There, they had prepared everything she might need.

“I feel like I could open a general store in here,” she mused, looking at the numerous items, and closed the closet door. She sat down on the luxurious sofa and gently placed her hand on her single suitcase. “What a day. The fish started to cry, and Mother launched into her old stories again...”

Washu stared at the gift from the children: glow-in-the-dark origami flowers within a 30-centimeter cube tektite case.

This planet had a custom similar to Earth's thousand origami cranes. They stuffed small flowers made of paper or cloth into a bottle or case as a get-well wish or farewell present. The gift had a bit of a gimmick; at a touch, the tektite case tapped into the human skin's tiny electrical charge, stimulating the special luminescent paper and causing it to float and faintly glow. There were flowers of various sizes, some folded cleanly, some folded clumsily. It was clear that the fish—or, rather, the children—had worked very hard on them.

Washu's vision blurred. To add insult to injury, a tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm so sleepy..." she mumbled, stifling a yawn. The week had been full of farewell parties, and the last day was spent saying goodbye to the people she had grown to know at the orphanage. After she patiently comforted the crying children and put them to bed, she listened to the director's stories—which all began with, "And we won't see *this* anymore," until the wee hours. She ended up coming aboard without sleeping a wink.

"I mustn't sleep." These were first-class accommodations, which Washu normally would never have a chance to see. She would take full advantage of the service and meals, no matter how tired she was. The in-flight meal was, indeed, mouth-wateringly delicious. "I feel like a country hick on a jaunt to the city... Well, it's the truth, at least!" She laughed wryly and then ordered seconds.

The incident that foreshadowed the rest of Washu's life happened a day after she transferred from the shuttle to the interstellar ferry. It started with a trivial matter, which might have easily been overlooked. Washu had taken a nap that compensated for her sleep-deprived state and, as usual, was collecting data until the wee hours, ship time.

She was accessing the ship's computers out of curiosity. Those in the Department of Philosophy were allowed access to the depths of the computers of Jurai's public or state-owned enterprises. Since Washu had not officially enrolled yet, accessing that information was illegal. However, considering the length of the journey to the Academy, it would be impossible to assemble a case in time, and she would only be scolded for a few hours.

“It’s brilliant. What a beautiful program.” Staring at the 3D projection that allowed her to see an extracted program in three dimensions, she sighed in admiration. The programs intricately overlapped each other, emitting a diamond-like light. “Heh...so this *is* Professor Ikuma’s work, after all. Then it should be around here.” She found a little doodle in the program—the one drawn by a child.

Besides her curiosity, Washu had accessed the ship’s computer for another reason: her own work was being used there. “Here it is.” One fragment of the giant program displayed in 3D was hers. The fragment was insignificant in size, but it was not something a student would usually be allowed to do before enrollment.

Are they teasing me? Or appeasing me? Even if this was genuine, could what I worked on really be usable in the real world? She had been anxious when she sent it to Prof. Ikuma. Seeing her work actually in use was a relief, and it made her enrollment in the Department of Philosophy finally feel real.

“Hm?” Checking the ship’s navigational program, she noticed a slight difference in the program and route data. Just then, in the room’s dim interior, the flowers she got from the children emitted a faint light without being touched.



Washu moved reflexively. Without time to think, she instantly activated a program.

Please work! She looked hopefully at the monitor. The small amount of time before she got results felt like hours. Within a few seconds, the light in the case faded, and the original darkness returned.

“I was so careless...!” she spat and began to analyze the data on her monitor. Someone had unleashed a virus to alter the memory of the nanomachine security system distributed in the air of the ship. The flowers had lit up in reaction to the slight static electricity generated as the nanomachines bumped into each other. “What did they do? What were they trying to do?!”

The nano-security system had stringent, multilayer precautionary measures, and program-altering viruses were expunged immediately. Even infected, there would be no desired effect without disabling about 94% of the precautionary measures. Logically, rewriting the program was impossible, so this attack itself seemed meaningless. But Washu felt certain. She furiously tapped the keys, searching the ship’s data, but there was too much. She did not have time to find what she was looking for.

“I can’t believe it. Is this what I amount to? I’m about to enroll in the Imperial Academy!” The sound and speed of the keys grew in proportion to her irritation. In contrast to her impatience, nothing but error messages were displayed on the monitor. “It’s no use...”

Just as Washu was about to give up, an odd icon popped up around the error messages, as if it had anticipated this moment. It began to move in a funny little dance. Ikuma’s icon. “The Professor? Oh!” She looked at the still-activated 3D program. Watching the beautiful, three-dimensional projection glitter like a jewel, she remembered his words.

A program is like a picture. Some people may not agree, but I think a program is the same as a piece of art. You can recognize a good one by looking at it. See, giving them physical shape makes it easier to perceive the programmer’s thoughts and emotions.

“...?!” As Washu stared at the 3D program, something did not feel right. “There?” Making a more detailed search of the location, she found a hidden

domain. She did not have conclusive evidence, but she was confident. She promptly went to work, and in a few seconds, had an answer.

“Oh, good. It looks like it’s only a powerful paralysis program. Against this powerful nano-security system, it didn’t have the capacity to issue multiple commands.” Whoever unleashed the paralysis program probably had business with someone aboard the ship. They did not intend to kill. “I better make an antibody program, or it’ll affect bodily functions.” Washu was already creating the antibody program as she talked. Since she had the original data, it should not take long.

Beep beep. Another window monitor sounded an alarm. “Now what?” The hidden domain was manipulating data in the external terminals. Since she was prioritizing working on the antibody program, Washu had not yet removed it, but had directly connected the external terminal to her machine.

“The navigational program... it’s out of control?!” The monitor informed her that this ship would exit the hyperspace drive into normal space in ten to twenty minutes—directly into the path of a star. “They’re making it look like an accident?!”

That was not all. The medical monitors had detected someone besides Washu moving on the ship. “Bio-signature movement detected.” Nobody should be moving. It had to be the person who set this up.

The reading was getting stronger. The individual was moving closer to Washu’s room.

The dark shadow opened the door as if it belonged in the room, supremely confident about its scheme. It slowly crept towards the lump under the bedclothes. Washu did not move. The dark shadow reached out and ripped the covers off. However, the bed contained nothing but the “sleeping” dummy Washu had hurriedly constructed. A force field instantly bound the intruder.

“Whoa!!” The dark shadow, caught off guard, was all too easily captured.

Washu, camouflaged with false data, jumped out from behind the sofa. “Y-you?!”

Illuminated by the room light was the security officer she knew. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from the Philosophy Department... Washu-chan.” The officer’s unexpectedly calm expression made Washu slightly anxious. However, pressed for time, she resumed her work on the antibody program as she interrogated him. “Why?”

“If you’re asking why I did this, it’s because I’m a spy, sent by the Shank Guild. Now, why were *you* targeted? It’s because you’ve been admitted to the Philosophy Department. Because you have the ability to see through and confront our scheme all on your own.”

At the man’s forthright answer, the alarm within Washu rang louder and louder. “What were you going to do? Brainwash me?”

“To send you to the Academy as a spy? That’s rather naive. We’ve got something similar to the Academy of our own. There’s not much value in the facilities themselves. What’s more valuable is talent. Jurai feels the same. You know the special treatment you’re getting.”

“You want to scout me?”

“That’s right. We’ve known each other a long time, and I don’t want to be rough. I liked the people in that town.” In contrast to his smiling demeanor, he turned an icy stare towards Washu. Something would happen to the town if she did not do as he demanded.

Is this a bluff...? She scanned his face to read him.

“You think I’m bluffing. It’s possible, of course, but isn’t the fact of my presence here enough?” He looked at her with a faint smile.

“But your wife and son are there.”

“And they won’t have to die if you come with me, Washu-chan.”

“The same thing will happen if you don’t do this.” She sensed no emotion towards his family in his words. But Washu remained fixated on the slight sentiment within him. Or, more precisely, she wanted to grasp at it. Otherwise, it would be too cruel to those two who loved him.

However, the man’s answer was ruthless. “They were excellent tools. Once I

achieved my goal to capture you, I was going to reward them with their lives.”

Washu’s fingers paused typing. “What did you do to that town?”

“Unh?!” At Washu’s complete change to emotionless calm, the man showed bewilderment for the first time. He would not waver in the face of angry threats, but her total absence of expression—something that could not be expressed in words—struck him with fear...even dread.

“What did you do?” Washu repeated.

“What will you do with that knowledge? I suppose it wouldn’t be beyond you to do *something* if you had the facts. So, there is no reason for me to... A nanomachine womb camouflaged as an N-worm underground...” Suddenly, his mouth started moving against his will.

“What’s the penetration pattern?”

“The same as...this... argh!!” The man’s internal nano-security must have removed the invading nanomachines. He did not confess anything further. But it was enough.

“Now I know the security system over there will be enough. I’ll have to thank Prof. Ikuma... Huh?” Washu was distracted by something on the medical monitor.

A moment later, the monitor controlling the force field binding the man was destroyed.

“Eek! Wh-what?” It was a small explosion, but the force of the blast knocked Washu backwards. When she sprang back up, she caught sight of the man forcing his way free of the residual force field. “No way!!”

“Don’t underestimate our technology.” He lunged at Washu. The Guardian system inferred her emotions, activated, and came in between them. This Guardian was a special one; Washu had tuned it herself. But the man was powerful, and a few seconds into combat, one of Washu’s Guardians was destroyed.

Washu’s eyes opened wide, and the man shrugged. “Not bad, eh? A fusion between our technology and Jurai’s close combat skills. I’ve gained abilities

beyond those of a Juraian Warrior. An AI controlled Guardian would be no match for me.”

“Then what about *this?*” The three Guardians multiplied to nine.

“Feh!” With three times the pressure, the man was kept at a distance.

“I must escape while I can,” Washu muttered. But then the man loomed before her. “...?!”

“I don’t care much for pride. I also brought Guardians...Washu-chan.” With a cruel grin, he approached her.

Seeing this, Washu realized that the man had no intention of capturing her. “Unh!” She stepped backwards in apparent resignation. The man chuckled repugnantly and reached for her bosom. But that was her diversion. In the next moment, the directional explosives she had camouflaged on the door’s surface exploded. *Direct hit!* Though she hadn’t hesitated to set a lethal trap, the man’s son’s smile momentarily flashed in her mind. *I’m sorry*, she mumbled to herself, and shook the image off.

Washu panted as the air vents discharged the smoke from the room. Then she saw that the man, who should have been blasted to the opposite wall, was gone. She did not have time to think. She fled the room through a gap in the door.

She heard the sound of metal on metal right behind her. One of the Guardians blocked the man’s attack. The sound revealed that Washu’s Guardians were superior to his. *Run!* Her survival instincts superseded everything else.

The man and the Guardian fought on equal terms, with tremendous speed imperceptible to normal humans. The processing speed was improved now that they were down to a single Guardian. Washu could only perceive the groaning in the air and the sounds of metal and destruction.

Crack! With a sound that could be physically felt through the air, Washu’s last Guardian was destroyed. That signaled death for Washu.

“Die!” The man was directly behind her. His hand slashed through the air and chopped off her head—or not. She was gone. “Teleported. But then...” The ship

had anti-superpower functions. Her powers inhibited, Washu reappeared just a few meters away. “You’ll only buy yourself a few minutes doing that.”

Continued use of superpowers in combat caused great mental stress. And a distance of a few meters was nothing for the man. If he detected any loss in focus or a predictable pattern, Washu’s life was over. But she needed to buy less than a minute’s time. Her destination was the observation hall beyond the door, just a few meters away. She teleported repeatedly and appeared in the corridor before the hall. A moment later, the man closed in. She was trapped.

Then the man’s knife hand stopped a hairsbreadth away from Washu’s face.

“Who are you?!” The young rookie who had been with him on Kanamitsu was grabbing his arm. “I apologize for being late Washu-dono.”

“You had a lot to do, right? Thanks for saving me.” Washu had been distracted by the medical monitor. It had detected someone else moving besides the two of them.

“Nishia, who are you?” Washu’s shocked attacker could not even move. Unbelievably, Nishia had immobilized the man who had mastered the Shank Guild’s technology and Jurai-style combat.

“If you have the power of a Juraian Warrior, the only one who could do this is a Juraian Royal, right, Nishia-dono?” said Washu.

“R-royal?!”

Nishia shrugged with consternation. “I’m just a young benchwarmer. And considering the honor of all Juraian Warriors, a *real* Warrior is nothing like this.”

“Heh heh, great! An Imperial Family member as your personal bodyguard. Eliminating a philosopher and a Royal at the same time would be a job well done.” As Washu’s attacker finished speaking, the ship shifted into normal space with a slight shudder. “If we don’t change course, we’ll head straight for a star. If we change course even a little, the ship *Shippris*, which is standing by, will attack.”

“*Shippris*, Shank Guild’s anti-Jurai flagship?”

“That’s right. You should be honored that our newest and most elite planet-

class mothership is receiving you.” The man sounded intoxicated by his own words, though it was undeniable that *Shippris* was a large and powerful battleship that gave trouble to even massive fleets.

“There aren’t any planets around that star...which makes it ideal.” Nishia mumbled. His quiet tone sounded like a beast roaring out of deep darkness. Even Washu felt slightly afraid.

“What was that...?”

“Mizunagi, contact *Shippris* and recommend their immediate and unconditional surrender.” Nishia spoke not to Washu or the other man but as if someone else was also there.

“Unconditional surrender?! You think this ship could stand a chance?!” Washu’s attacker yelled, frustrated to be ignored. Just then, someone’s voice echoed in Washu’s head... Or, rather, an image formed.

Who is it? It can’t be...

“That’s right. The Jurai Imperial Family all have ships, don’t they?” At Washu’s inquiry, Nishia smiled.

“A Royal Ship?! Impossible!!” Nishia did not answer. “You said Mizunagi? Is there a Royal Ship outside? No, this ship is being guarded by regular battleships. And I shifted the timing of their jump into normal space. It would take an hour of Galactic Standard Time for them to get here, no matter how fast they were!”

“Senpai, it’s *here*, on this ship.”

“What?!”

In that instant, they saw beautiful sails of light unfurl from the observation deck windows.

“Light Hawk Wings...” The moment the man murmured those words, a flash of light enveloped his body.

“He self-destructed?!” Nishia and Washu both realized at the same time. With a Juraian Warrior’s reflexes, Nishia threw them to the floor and covered Washu to protect her. But the flash of light did not spread. A white wing covered the man’s body, blocking the explosion.

“This is a Light Hawk Wing? But...” Nishia looked out the window to confirm that they were there. The three Light Hawk Wings created by the Royal Tree shone outside.

There must be two Third-Generation Trees for the Light Hawk Wings to materialize. Then...who is producing this one?

Neither Nishia nor Washu herself realized that the three jewels in Washu’s pocket were shining brightly.

One early morning, on the third day after the incident, their ship arrived at the Academy’s satellite station. The ferry Washu was on had two Royal Ship cores on board. Royal Ship cores were extremely small and disguising them on a medium-sized passenger ship was simple. Not even the Shank Guild’s mothership stood a chance against two Royal Ships.

However, even a Royal Ship needed time to destroy a planet-class ship. There was a risk that the enemy ship would use her size to escape. *Shippris* would not surrender at first. But in a few minutes, once half their armaments failed, the recommendation for non-combatants to abandon ship was accepted without protest. Washu guessed that *Shippris* would use the escape pods as a shield, and Nishia had anticipated as much, too. By the time they escaped, one of the Royal Trees had already infiltrated the *Shippris* and taken it over.

“To think that the most advanced outer hull unit actually served to inhibit the core of a Royal Tree’s true powers.”

The core’s direct attack created a distortion field, which induced abnormal activity in the nearby star, shortening its lifespan by a few hundred million years. “As you saw, we can only rarely use direct core attacks. Please keep this matter confidential.”

“I know.”

“We know where their base is. By now, they’re under attack by their own *Shippris*, under Royal Tree control, plus the Juraian fleet.” Jurai’s offensive power would be overwhelming with that united front, no matter what the scale of the Shank Guild’s base was, or how much power they had.

“Oh...” Washu suddenly heard a voice in her head, similar to the one she had heard when they were rescued from Shank’s spy.

“What?!” Almost at the same time, Nishia spoke.

“Did something happen?”

“No...it’s nothing. I’m sorry, there’s been an emergency, so I must take my leave. Take care, Washu-dono.”

“You too, Nishia-dono.” It was clear to her that something must have happened, but she knew it was pointless to ask. She said her goodbyes to Nishia, shook hands, and hurried to the entry shuttle port. It would be a few years until she found out what had happened.

Naja

“What is *that*...?”

Washu, who had just arrived at the Jurai Imperial Academy, was hiding behind a large pillar. Akara Naja, a woman three years her senior, had come to greet her. But she was not alone. She was leading a crowd of people prepared for the full-blown pageantry of a reception for some head of state: a brass band, a garrison of students in full dress uniform, children with small pennants, and thousands of banners that read “Welcome, Hakubi Washu-sama.”

Of course, she had received a similar, if not flashier, send-off when she left home. What was decidedly different was that this grand welcome party was clearly out of place. They stood out terribly, and people gave them a wide berth.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. There’s no way I’m going out there!” Washu was seriously considering turning around on the spot, buying a ticket home, and heading back to Kanamitsu.

“Hey, Naja, you here to welcome a new student?” A man, apparently a student, strode decisively out from the throng of rubberneckers to speak to Naja.

“Yes, and she’s supposed to be the greatest genius to come here since the Academy’s founding. But she sure is late.”

“Say, Naja... I think you ought to know...”

“There she is!!” Naja spotted Washu behind the pillar, trying to sneak away, and sprinted to catch her. “Hey! Why are you running away?!” Still holding her banner, she raced after Washu.

I don’t blame her, thought every single person present.

“Stop!!” Naja called after Washu and then yelled back to the crowd, “What are you all doing? After her!”

Washu lost the game of tag. She possessed superior legs and endurance, but her opponent was more familiar with the local geography. Besides, this was Naja, a student in the Department of Philosophy. Since Washu wasn't using her powers, she had no chance against such a large-scale mobilization.

Naja seemed to be quite notorious at the Academy, and Washu spotted many people pointing and whispering wherever they went. Furthermore, the attention-grabbing chase at the airport was featured in the extra edition of the student newspaper, which Washu held by the time they boarded the bus for the Department of Philosophy. Even so soon after her arrival, Washu had already become a celebrity.

"Naja-san, I wanted to say..." Washu's hands trembled slightly.

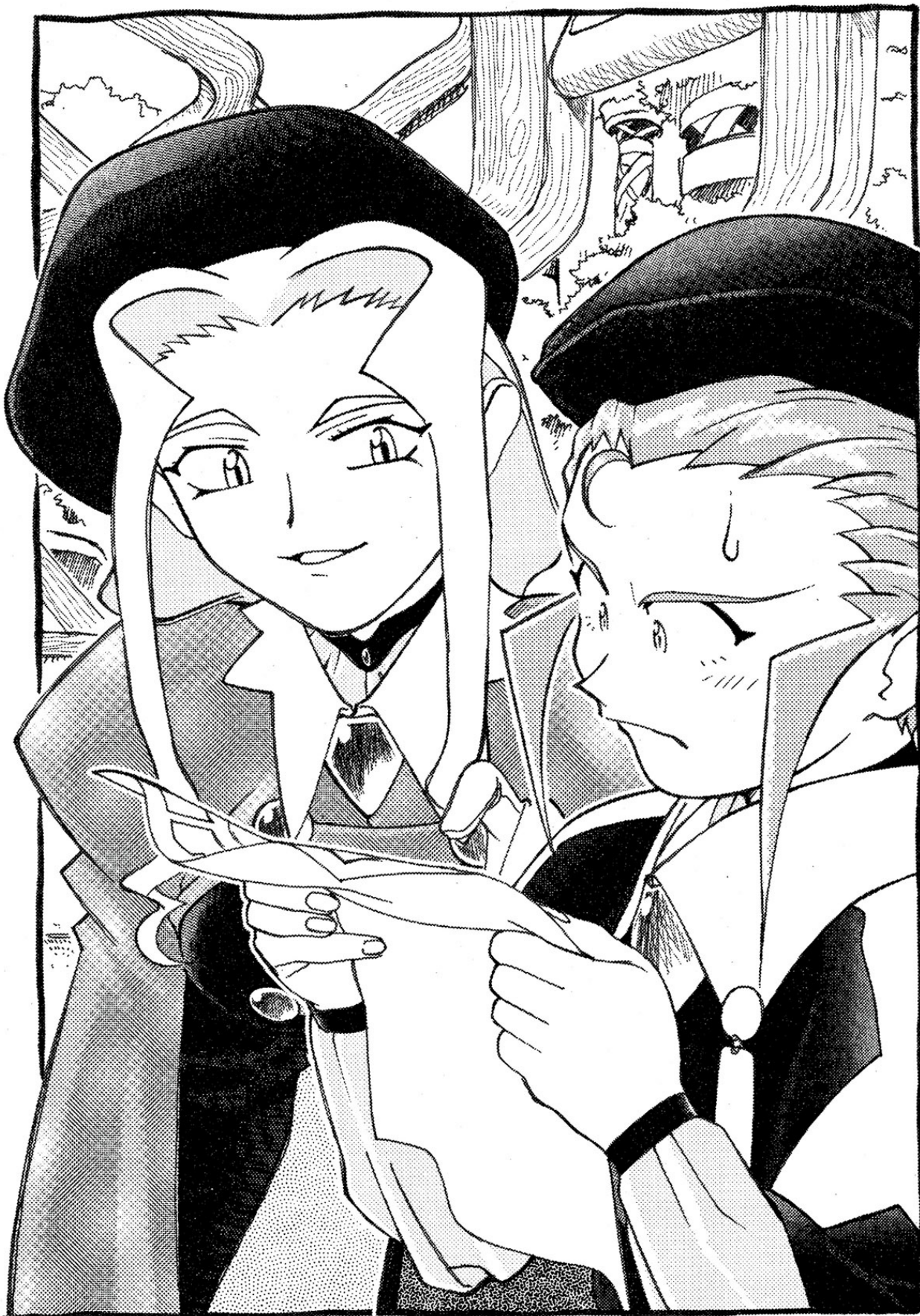
"Ha ha, call me Naja. The greatest genius in the Academy's history is already the center of attention! I'm impressed," Naja laughed and patted Washu's shoulders.

"Thanks to you."

"What I did was nothing. Everyone is curious about the genius, of course."

Does this woman not get sarcasm? Was she happy-go-lucky or clueless? It left Washu at a loss for words.

"In any case, it took thirty-three minutes, thirty-five seconds to pin you down... I wouldn't expect anything less from a genius. I expected to take you down right at the thirty-three minute, thirty-three second mark... Like I said, a genius!" Naja nodded, impressed, as she looked over the paper.



What?! But I was honestly trying to outrun them... Washu stared at Naja in consternation. Naja's words truly shocked her.

"By the way, Miss Genius..."

"A genius, by two seconds? Please don't call me that. I..."

"So I can call you Washu-chan?"

"Wait, I just met you, and..."

"Washu-chan, do you have a boyfriend?" Naja pressed on, ignoring Washu's objections.

"Huh? Uh...what I'm saying is..."

"You don't, do you, Washu-chan? Do you? Do you?"

Overwhelmed, Washu was taken aback. "I don't..." That, and a sigh, were all she could muster.

"So, you're single!"

"You sound rather happy..."

"Huh? Well, I mean... I don't have a boyfriend either. We're two of a kind, right, Washu-chan?" The endearment "Washu-chan" seemed to have stuck. "I just know we'll get along. Let's be friends. ♥ I know the Academy like my own backyard, Washu-chan, so you can ask me anything."

"Have you been here long?"

"I was born here." Naja meant that she had been born at the Academy. Although the planet technically belonged to the Academy, the campus did not cover the whole world. Naturally, there were operation and maintenance facilities, as well as the institutions necessary for the employees, students, and professors and their families to live comfortably. All those elements, taken together, could be referred to as the Academy.

The Academy also had many systems in place to offer different educational models. Most attendees stayed at dormitories or apartments close to their departments, but some built houses on small, isolated islands and attended online correspondence courses. Some even studied while cruising around the

planet in camper vans or on a boat.

Of course, with that many students, not all of them were well-off. Some slept in their department buildings in sleeping bags and worked for their tuition money. Intercontinental wars between dueling departments were fairly common, so a problem-solving organization—a sort of student council cum federation—was established with representatives from each department.

It was no exaggeration to say that the Academy had all the problems common to entire planets. It was just that most people there worked diligently in the pursuit of knowledge. That was the biggest difference between the Academy and other worlds.

“Here we are.” After disembarking from the bus and walking for five minutes, Washu and Naja stopped in front of a large house. It was a spacious residence, befitting a plutocrat. The neighborhood seemed to be an affluent residential district, lined with palatial mansions, but this one was particularly magnificent.

“This is impressive. Is this your house, Naja-san?”

“...” Naja returned a piercing stare with dead eyes.

“Um... Naja-san?”

“Yup, nice joke. Very funny,” Naja said with a stiff smile, patting her on the shoulder. “Nobody invites a new student to their own house straight off the ship.”

“Is this the school?”

“Yeah, right!” Just as Naja shouted in delight, the large gates slowly opened. Beyond them were an elderly man and rows of maids lined up in an orderly manner on either side of the stone pavement leading to the mansion.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Hakubi Washu-sama. Welcome.” The man reverently bowed his head. Behind him were gardens gorgeously lit up in the night.

Washu pointed towards the house with an obvious silent question: was this really her house? Naja enthusiastically nodded and said, “It’s gotten late, so

we'll do the administrative paperwork tomorrow. The day's events seem to have shocked—err—tired you out.”

“Okay...”

“I'll come get you at eight o'clock in the morning. Good night!” Naja cheerfully waved, ignoring Washu's attempt to talk, and briskly walked off.

“She's as boisterous as the fishies back home, all by herself,” Washu mused.

The elderly butler courteously reintroduced himself, exuding benevolence. “Welcome, Hakubi-sama. My name is Hirata, and I am charged with managing this mansion. Pleased to make your acquaintance. This house has a staff of a hundred and fifty, each hand-picked, myself included. Please let us know if you need anything.”

“Is this...really my house? Maybe dozens of other students live here, too...?”

“No, per Ikuma-sama's instructions, this house was prepared for Hakubi-sama to reside alone.”

“The Professor?”

“Yes. Now, allow us to show you inside. This way.”

The mansion was just as luxurious as any of the ones she had been invited to for the farewell parties on Kanamitsu, her home world. Every room was stocked with the finest, from the furnishings to the necessities.

“I could fit plenty of research equipment in this bedroom.” Washu looked around, dumbfounded, at the needlessly large room. It seemed as big as the entire kindergarten building back home.

“Hakubi-sama, students in the Department of Philosophy receive personal laboratories. This is strictly your private space. Of course, it's up to you how you use it.”

“My personal lab?”

“Yes. It depends on your research topic, and I cannot give you definitive information, as some people do not consider having more than the necessary space to be a good thing. But lab size ranges from a large trailer, for example, to... look, that satellite you can see in the sky is the personal research facility of

a professor in the Department of Philosophy.” He pointed at the white dot floating through the heavens.

“I feel extremely out of place...” Washu muttered, looking up at the sky from the bedroom terrace.

“Don’t be silly. Considering your accomplishments even before your matriculation, it’s only natural to have these things supplied for you.”

“I haven’t done anything that impressive.”

“Shank...wouldn’t agree with you.”

“...!!” Washu’s expression contorted, not because she remembered being in mortal danger, but because the butler’s words reminded her of the man she had once known.

“I apologize... I’ve said too much.”

“It’s all right. I understand what it means to come here and the importance others place on what I seek...”

“The preparations for dinner should be complete. With plenty of food, creature comforts, and sleep, people can do anything.”

“Eat some grub, take a bath, and go to bed. I used to say that a lot to the kiddos. You’re right... They all had so much energy. Let’s go, then.”

“Yes, Hakubi-sama. This way.”

“Oh, yeah, could you not call me that? Nobody calls me by my last name. Naja-san was such an icebreaker. Just call me Washu.”

“All right, Washu-sama.”

After the butler left the room, she flung herself onto the bed, as she always had in her room at the orphanage. The Imperial Academy was indeed amazing, and full of surprises. *Well... I guess that means what I study is worth it.* Washu touched the luminescent paper in her bag. The multicolored light reminded her of her future. So many things could happen.

Clack clack...

The fork and knife in Washu's hands trembled and clattered against the edge of the plate. The butler and maids looked anxiously at Washu and the deep furrow in her brow.

"Washu-sama, I apologize. Is there anything not to your satisfaction?"

"Argh... This is *such* a waste!!" Washu exclaimed.

"Excuse me?"

"Look, I'm not a *galasha**! There's no way I could eat this much food!" Washu stood up in front of a table that could easily seat a hundred, covered in plates of food. Furthermore, she was the only one eating, while ten maids served her. As thick-skinned as she was, Washu could not bear it. She did not *want* to. "Gather around everyone who's not busy right now. Let's all eat *together*."

"With all due respect, we serve you. We cannot..."

"I don't like such stiff formalities. Besides, I didn't hire you. This is all Jurai's goodwill," Washu declared to shut the butler down.

"But you are worth this effort."

"I'll make that decision myself. For better or worse...this lifestyle is too extravagant for me right now. It's easy to get used to luxury, but getting used to going without is no simple matter. I don't want to grow insensitive to the hardships of life, for the sake of my future in the Academy."

"If you insist..."

"I'm sorry. Besides, meals are more enjoyable when shared."

At her prompt, the party started. The maids close to each other in age became fast friends and engaged in lively conversations about their personal backgrounds and romantic entanglements. Hirata, the solemn butler, seemed uncomfortable with such boisterous chatter.

"W-Washu-sama! Please, leave that to us!" he implored Washu, who had started serving food and bussing the table, just as she used to at the orphanage back home.

"Ha ha! I couldn't resist. Force of habit." After being so discomfited yesterday, Washu had found her usual stride again.

“Thank you for the meal.”

“Washu-sama! We’ll do the cleanup.” After the party, Washu started clearing the table, and the butler hastily stepped in to stop her.

“It’ll be faster if everyone chips in. Could you separate out the greasy plates and bring them over?” Washu headed for the kitchen with an armful of dishes. Since she had experience managing groups of people, especially young children, she led skillfully the team and got the job done astonishingly fast.

“Her speed and finesse at cleaning up show her practiced hand, but her timing and harmony in leading others is brilliant. There’s no other way to put it,” murmured the senior maid, who was the butler’s second-in-command. She sounded impressed.

“True. But we were placed here so that she could focus on her studies. We should be the ones attending to the daily chores.”

“She took care of children on her home world. This is probably what daily life looked like for her.”

The butler could only sigh deeply.

“All right! We’re done. Good job, everyone.” Washu looked around, satisfied. “Now it’s time for a bath...”

“I’ll have someone lead the way.” Obviously, the butler could not take her. “Could somebody please show Washu-sama to the bath?”

“Oh, allow me.” A young maid stepped forward. “This way!”

Her name was Sobo Mei. She was the youngest of the maids and two years younger than Washu. Originally from Jurai, she became a maid to pay for her living expenses while studying at the Academy. Back then, quite a lot of money was required to attend, and if one was not born into wealth, it was impossible to raise the funds. But the Academy’s other function was to cultivate talent, and as such, there was a scholarship system. Students like Washu, who were accepted into the Department of Philosophy, the highest seat of learning, were exempted from all expenses—from tuition to living costs. However, this

privilege was limited to a small percentage of people. And while most were exempt from tuition, they still had to cover their own living expenses.

Selection for this group was the result of a number of exams, but even passing difficult tests did not guarantee acceptance into an applicant's desired department. Aptitude tests often led to entry into departments that weren't the prospective student's first choice.

"To get into another department, you have to pass the transfer exam that takes place every few years or pay your own way..." It was clear that Mei did not have much in terms of funds. "That's why I took the maid exam. A lot of people take this route. It covers your living expenses, and you get a salary."

"Wow! Good for you. Mei-san, which department do you want to get into?"

"I...want to be an Imperial Tutor."

"Imperial Tutor?"

"Yes, I want to teach the princes and princesses of the Juraian Imperial Family." Mei blushed and continued. "A member of Jurai's nobility was a lecturer at the school I went to..."

"Juraian nobility?! As a lecturer?"

"On Jurai, they teach at a limited number of schools, but my school was the alma mater... And often, they come to the alma mater of *their* Imperial Tutor, to repay the favor, as it were. I was very indebted. Such an openhearted, friendly teacher... And with their recent marriage, and the birth of a baby, I wanted to repay the favor...even a little bit..."

"I see... And did you *like* this person, by any chance?" Washu asked a bit cheekily.

"Y-yes!"

"Oh, well, you owned it. So, tell me more. Did your heart skip a beat?"

"Yes...she was very dignified, and very pretty, like you, Washu-sama."

"What? She's a woman?"

"Yes?" Noticing Washu's reaction, Mei looked quizzical.

“Oh...I’m sorry, that must be hard.”

“Yes... Oh!” Mei finally realized what Washu was thinking and blushed. “No! I’m straight, and I’m not inclined that way.”

In this day and age, gender reaffirmation surgeries were commonplace. However, Washu had assumed Mei was attracted to members of the same sex.

“I’m sorry. I assumed you were talking about a man, so my thoughts went in that direction.”

“Jeez! But...I heard that people with that sexual orientation were not included in this particular maid application pool.”

“Why? I wouldn’t mind,” said Washu.

“They said there are still laws outlawing same-sex...intercourse where you’re from, on Kanamitsu.”

“There are...?”

“Some of those laws do remain in the regional books in your homeland, although they’re from thousands of years ago,” Mei chuckled. Washu smiled with her.

“Good grief. So, they’ve neglected to remove them from the books... It’s so gracious of the administrators to have looked into all these details. They’ve really left nothing wanting. It doesn’t matter to me, since I’m not inclined that way anyway.”

“Oh, then you should be careful of Naja. One of my friends reminds me of her.”

Well, she was overly familiar... Washu thought. She could not help but laugh that Mei was such a gossip.

“What’s the matter...?”

“Nothing. All right, I understand. I’ll be careful not to get pinned down.”

“Ah, here’s the entrance to the grand bathroom.” Past gateposts without doors was an open garden.

“There’s a bath here?” Although Washu expected extravagance by now, the

garden was still astounding.

“No, this is the dressing room.” Mei’s answer exceeded Washu’s expectations. The enormous disparity between her previous life and the present was blunting her ability to think.

Trees and buildings cleverly concealed the dressing room. Beyond that... “Is this a pool?” Washu asked, staring.

“No, this is the bath.”

“Just had to ask.”

There were many large bodies of water, surrounded by stands of colorful tropical trees, a winding water slide a dozen meters tall, and various recreational attractions; the vista was such that Washu could only see it as a water park.

“This is for your personal use, so it’s up to you whether you want to use it as a pool.”

“I feel like I’m going to go crazy. Heh heh heh...”

“W-Washu-sama?” Mei reflexively stepped backwards upon hearing Washu’s low, creepy laughter.

“All the female employees shall use this place! All right?”

“What?”

“*Everyone* uses it. Got that?!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” Mei answered joyfully. “I wanted to try it, just once.”

“I figured as much.”

“But...are you sure?”

“I would look stupid going down that big slide all by myself.”

“You think so? Maybe objectively, but I wouldn’t mind. It looks fun,” Mei declared. She obviously wanted to give it a try.

“If you’re not busy with your work, do you want to slide down a couple times right now?”

“What?! Are you sure?” Mei was almost shedding tears of joy.

“Heh, go ahead.”

Thanks to Mei’s infectious glee, Washu was going down the slide with her less than an hour later. After several dozen rides, Washu returned to her bedroom exhausted, too tired to change into the pajamas laid out for her. She stripped to her underwear and fell into bed. “Mei has so much energy...” she mumbled and then drifted off into a deep slumber.

The next morning, Mei, full of energy again, woke Washu up. Once she finished breakfast with the entire staff, and made herself presentable, the time when she had promised to meet Naja arrived. But, even once eight o’clock had come and gone, Naja did not show up.

“She’s very busy and is notorious for being hard to get a hold of. After she was chosen as your guide, she got incessant inquiries into your whereabouts, even before your arrival.”

“Oh yeah?” Washu sipped her tea on the terrace as she listened to the maids, squinted at the warm sunshine, and looked up at the clear blue sky. “All right, I’ve made up my mind.”

“About what, ma’am?”

“It’s a twenty-minute walk from here to the campus, right? I’m going to go for a walk.”

“But Naja-sama...”

“Please let her know when she gets here.” Washu put on the sandals that rested on the terrace and walked off beyond the grounds, paying no heed to the maids’ calls.

The Academy’s Department of Philosophy was located in a temperate region with four distinct seasons, and spring was in full swing. It was the opposite of Kanamitsu, which had just been entering early autumn. Whereas fall tended to be melancholic, the fresh spring green and glorious weather beckoned Washu with the sparkle of new life, and she took a bit of a detour.

Half an hour later, she was in the leafy shade where she could see the Department of Philosophy. Strictly speaking, she was hiding. There was nothing that indicated the campus boundaries, as there were no walls or fences, just a row of large trees that stretched for miles. There were no buildings, save for a campus building about a kilometer away. Judging by the treetops peeking above the horizon, there was apparently a hill beyond the building.

In any case...what is that? Washu sighed internally. In front of an especially large tree that seemed to serve as a gate, two large robots stood like gatekeepers, holding a giant banner that read, “Welcome, Washu-chan!” in huge letters. At the robots’ feet were a fife and drum band consisting of several hundred members, a group of elementary students with pennants, and a throng of rubberneckers and journalists. A totally strange vibe surrounded them, much worse than yesterday’s scene at the airport.

They aren’t going to catch me this time. Unfortunately, even if she tried a detour, Naja would spot her at once. Washu started to rack her brains. She tried to anticipate the muscle movements, lines of sight, and behavior of the thousand-plus people present, to calculate their blind spots, in order to reach the campus without being seen. But there were uncertain variables in all the simulations.

The most troublesome humans were children. Washu had a bad feeling about one boy, standing with an air of boredom next to his father, whom she watched carefully. *There’s nothing worse than a bored child.* Conveniently, the boy turned to his father to complain about his boredom, which positioned him in a shadow near Washu.

Good! If only I could get past that kid... Now!!

“Oh, I know that lady!” In the next moment, with exquisite timing, the boy outwitted Washu... although, of course, he had no such intent.

“A scholar is no match for a savant,” said some writer, somewhere. A child’s whim had easily thwarted all of Washu’s intellectual powers and insight. At the boy’s words, every single gaze turned to focus on Washu. Running was futile.

“I’m sorry! Please, let me through!” she shouted impulsively, even though she knew it was pointless.

“Naja’s not here because she went to go get you.” Washu recognized the man. He was the student who had spoken to Naja yesterday. “You didn’t see her on the way here?”

They had just missed each other because Washu took the long route. Naja had not returned yet; if she had, she would have leapt out of the crowd.

“Go on, while you can.” He pointed towards the building.

“Huh?”

“We understand how embarrassing all this is for you. Hurry.” Everyone nodded at his words.

“Th-thanks.” Washu bowed deeply and started running. It was about a kilometer to the closest building. There was no cover, just an open field, like a park. If Naja returned, she would spot Washu instantly. Running at a desperate speed, Washu quickly broke the Academy record for women’s sprinting.

“Heh!” A smile appeared on Washu’s lips as she panted. She was internally fearful that Naja would discover her at any moment, but she also felt triumphant. She would not owe anything to anyone. That was what made her Washu. In that sense, she had an Imperial Academy philosopher’s attitude already.

Washu kept running.

“Oh?” Hiding behind the building, Washu finally felt comfortable. The sights before her captivated her. A large grove of Powder Snow trees, transplanted from the Jurai home world, bloomed in full resplendent glory.

As Washu had surmised, she was on a hillock overlooking a gentle slope. Low buildings (most were single-story) spread for several kilometers down to the ocean, like terraced fields. Each building’s roof served as the garden of the building above it, full of colorful flowers, providing a contrast to the white Powder Snow blossoms. Jurai was second to none when it came to horticulture.

A man came up to talk to her as she walked around and peeked about. “Hey,

you. This place is for authorized personnel only.” The arrogant, overbearing stranger spoke with his chest puffed up, despite his compact, stocky build. Washu thought for a moment that he was a professor, but he had a student’s badge on his uniform. She intuitively understood that he was a type seen often at the send-off parties on Kanamitsu: people who looked down on others.

However, considering the treatment she had received at the Academy, perhaps it was natural that philosophy students considered themselves more elite than necessary.

“Excuse me, where is the office?”

“The office?”

“I need to fill out the admission paperwork...”

The man burst out laughing. “New student? Do you have any idea where you are? Only the chosen among the most elite in the entire galaxy can enter here. It’s not a place for a child like you. Perhaps you’re mistaking it for the Department of Ancient Literature the next town over.” The man looked at her with the utmost contempt.

Since he did not recognize her, he must not have seen yesterday’s news.

“Look out!!” called a voice. The next moment, the man standing in front of Washu received a flying kick from the voice’s source. He screamed like a squashed frog as he plunged headfirst into the bushes.



“Do you hate me, Washu-chan?!” Naja stood in front of her.

She stared reproachfully at Washu, like a ghost in daylight. She did not check on the man she had just kicked to the ground, so she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Huh?”

“I stayed up all night to prepare the commemoration for your first arrival!” Naja professed, tears brimming in her eyes.

“It’s a nuisance.” Washu’s counterattack landed perfectly, and Naja froze. *If I don’t say this now, who knows what she’ll do to me in the future.* Washu stared at her with resolute eyes. Any weakness would mean defeat.

“Washu-chan, you meanie...!” It seemed that Washu had won.

The battered man crawled out from the bushes. “What was *that* for?! Urk... Naja!! I mean, Naja-kun...” He added the honorific reluctantly. He was covered in scratches, and purple veins bulged from his bright red temples.

“I’m sorry, Clay.” Despite Naja’s apology, she glared fiercely at the man she called Clay. Her sadness at Washu’s rejection of the welcome ceremony that she had spent so much effort preparing was transformed into anger. In other words, she was looking for a target to vent her anger at, and it was more than enough to dampen Clay’s momentum.

“Oh, so she’s your acquaintance... But there’s a problem. Most of this area is off limits to those not in the program.” Reevaluating the situation, Clay directed his wrath towards Washu.

“Let’s go, Washu-chan!” Ignoring Clay, Naja tried to lead Washu away.

“Hey, didn’t you hear what I said?!”

“What?!”

“I mean, that student there should not be...” Clay’s voice grew weaker as Naja’s presence overwhelmed him.

“If you’re a man, speak up!!” Naja barked.

“Well, I mean, uh...” His face twitched in humiliation.

“Naja-kun, what’s going on here?” Ikuma, the dean of the Department of Philosophy, just happened to be passing by. Any observer would have assumed the three were fighting, so his alarm was justified. “Hm...? You are...” Ikuma’s eyebrow twitched at Washu, who was standing next to Naja.

“Oh, Professor. I was just asking Naja-kun what she was thinking, bringing in an outsider.” Clay’s attitude upon seeing Ikuma became courteous, nearly servile. It was a complete 360 from his earlier arrogance. “Could you back me up, Professor?”

“Is that you, Washu-kun?!” Ignoring Clay, Ikuma approached Washu.

“Nice to meet you, Professor.”

“Yes, this is the first time we’ve met in person. Dear me, I didn’t recognize you. You’re so much more beautiful than the images.”

“Please. I don’t know how to thank you for the luxurious residence you’ve prepared for me.”

“Ha ha ha... Don’t worry about it. That only represents a fraction of the patent proceeds from our collaborative research. Just rewards.”

“Collaborative research?! P-Professor, you know her...?” Clay interrupted, with an incredulous expression. That was only natural. Not even other professors—let alone regular students—managed to co-author Professor Ikuma’s research. Merely being his research assistant was an extreme honor.

“Oh, you’re still here? Might as well introduce you... This is Hakubi Washu-kun. She is going to start this semester. She’ll be eighteen this year. She’ll beat Naja-kun’s record as the youngest student to be admitted into the department.”

“Professor, she was qualified four years ago after fulfilling all core coursework,” Naja interjected.

“F-four years...!” Clay’s face twitched so hard.

“Ah, yes, quite right. As you know, Clay-kun, you cannot be admitted until you’re eighteen. That’ll bring an end to any more records.”

Naja gazed with satisfaction at Clay, who could not even laugh, and only

twitched instead.

“Do you think he learned his lesson?” Ikuma whispered to Naja, who responded by flashing a victory sign with her fingers.

“Professor, we still have to fill out some paperwork.” Turning into the model philosophy student, Naja saluted and headed for the campus with Washu.

“Oh, Washu-kun—I’m sure they’ll tell you at the office, but they determined that you’ll be placed in Class 6 with Naja-kun.” Ikuma added. He then promptly walked off in the opposite direction.

Clay, left behind, dejectedly sank down to the ground. He was in Class 9. *A girl of eighteen, fresh into the Academy, three classes above me. How could that be...?* He remained rooted on the spot for three hours before he could resolve his identity crisis. That was the first encounter between Washu and Clay.

As soon as Naja entered the building with Washu, she burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! Did you see that stupid look on Clay’s face, Washu-chan?”

“Um, er...”

“I guess you don’t know him. Be careful, he’s the worst in the department...”

“Before that, Naja-san, I’m sorry I broke your record of being the youngest...” Washu apologized sincerely. She had a gut feeling that she should.

“It’s all right, I’m not studying to set records...” Naja seemed indifferent, but suddenly her face clouded over. “It’s just that...”

“What’s wrong?” Washu became anxious that she had done something wrong after all.

“There aren’t any young men...”

“Huh?”

“You know, incoming students here are generally married... Other departments call us ‘the nursing home!’” Naja turned her mouth down at the corners for emphasis, clenching her hands into fists.

“Is that so?”

“Is that all you have to say, Washu-chan? This is a serious problem for mature women!!”

“Y-yes, I suppose... Ha ha ha...” Washu burst out laughing at Naja’s serious look.

Naja laughed, too. “There are a lot of weirdos, but they’re all good people. Just be careful with Clay. His particular brand of weird is something else.”

“Pot, meet kettle...” Washu muttered under her breath, reflecting on Naja’s actions today and yesterday.

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing.”

“Okay. Once the paperwork is done, let’s continue with the welcome party.”

“I-I thought I refused that?!”

“That was the *reception* for the welcome party.”

“Huh?”

“The real party’s yet to begin.” They climbed the stairs, and beyond, Washu saw a garden transformed into a festival venue capable of holding thousands of people.

“I’m leaving.”

“No!” Naja caught Washu and smiled, whispering into her ear. “This time, you won’t get away. ♥”

A few weeks passed. The curriculum was a lot more relaxed than Washu had imagined... Or, rather, there were no compulsory elements. Paradoxically, that made things extremely difficult. Lazy procrastinators never managed to advance and were expelled once they exceeded the number of years they were allowed to spend on their degree.

Nobody forced anyone to do anything, but nobody helped, either. Washu was grateful to have so much time to adjust to all the changes. She also had time to think about her mother and the fishies back home.

“Going out today, ma’am?” The butler addressed Washu as she prepared breakfast and a box lunch in the kitchen. It was a little after 4:00 AM and still dark outside.

“I told you, you didn’t need to get up.”

“Washu-sama, I’ve said many times that we...”

“I know. You were hired for this, right?”

“If the meals prepared by the maids are not to your liking, I will switch the staff.” The butler seemed genuinely puzzled, peering at the food she was packing.

“I love the meals they make. I do. But let me cook for myself sometimes. I like rummaging about in the dark kitchen, dimly lit by the lights in the pantry.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s no problem at all. It was my mother’s policy to have the children see that someone had to make meals for them three times a day. She wanted them to know the effort it takes to make a meal and how disrespectful it is to waste it. Of course, we were all taught from a young age to cook for ourselves.” Washu remembered the kind director of the orphanage and smiled.

“She sounds like a wonderful lady.”

“And my mother always used to say, ‘If you can make yourself a good meal, you can manage to live anywhere.’”

“Food is the foundation of all creatures, great and small.”

“And it would make her invincible if she were good in bed,” Naja suddenly piped up from behind her.

“Naja-san! I thought you went home last night...”

“Mei-chan found me on the way out. We were remodeling the slide in the hot springs pool. I tried it myself on the second run and got too much momentum and flew into the shrubbery. I knocked myself out until just now. Ha ha ha!”

The butler sighed. Currently, Washu’s hot springs pool...or rather, the

bathhouse...was expanding underground and had transformed into an amusement park many times larger than the previous incarnation. It was all Naja's fault. "Please don't remodel the house as you please."

"Now, now, everyone's benefiting from it." Naja was quite indifferent to the butler's protests. She felt not one iota of guilt.

"You mean Mei and the neighborhood kids," pointed out Washu.

"Aren't you used to dealing with children? There were some cute kids who insisted they were going to marry you when they grow up."

"You deal with them on a whole different level. There aren't many people who can play with children as equals."

Indeed, Naja even played airsoft games with the children in the bathroom. Most of the battles took the form of Naja versus the children, but sometimes, the children were split into two groups, with Naja and Washu leading the teams.

"You seem to have a lot of fun yourself," Naja retorted.

"What about Mei?" Washu asked, sighing. She was almost done, and she decided to cut off the pointless conversation by asking about the most pressing issue.

"What? Well...you know..." Naja stammered as the topic swung to Mei.

"You said you tried it yourself on the *second* run."

"I let her noble sacrifice go to waste."

"You made her your guinea pig?!" Washu glared at Naja.

"But, but...! She said, 'Oh, Naja-sama, you finished it!' She didn't even give me a chance to stop her... And it was quite an epic fail. I put her back in her room."

"Good grief. You have to make sure it's not dangerous for the kiddos."

"Okay, okay. I'll do that now." Naja watched as Washu slung her bag over her shoulder. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes, for a bit of a hike."

"I know a good place..."

“Please just make the bathroom safe for the kids.” Washu prevented Naja from following her.

“Just trying to let you know...”

“Next time. See you later.” Without telling them her destination, Washu bolted from the kitchen and through the mist-covered yard. A wisp of wind, the last trace of winter, nipped at her cheeks.

In the past few weeks, Naja had introduced Washu to a variety of people in different places, but most of them occupied special niches. In any society, there were two sides, the light and the dark... The Academy was no exception. Philosophers had special status. They often needed access to things beyond Academy law. Naja was introducing her to people who would help her avoid the problems latent in venturing into the underbelly of society, or help her along the way, which would be necessary in her life here.

“Why are all her friends such intense people?” Washu wondered, exhausted. A diet full of rich foods became tiresome no matter how good those foods were, and it was human nature to crave something lighter. She’d decided to go out by herself to search for *normal* places. Also, there was one place she was curious about. She had seen it from the bus as Naja showed her around.

“There it is!”

Further out in the suburbs from the residential area where Washu lived was an abandoned farm, with an old observatory on top of the hill. It was the object of Washu’s fascination. Now that interstellar space travel was commonplace, practically nobody was in the habit of making celestial observations from a planet’s surface. If anyone did, they were not academics but hobbyists. Or perhaps someone studying ancient techniques in the pursuit of archaeology or historical anthropology.

“Or maybe someone who’s an antique collector,” Washu mused, as she circled the building with curiosity. The outer wall was old and decrepit.

“Excuse me, may I help you?” An elderly woman timidly called out to her.

Washu noticed that the door to the observatory was open and realized that

was the old woman's home. "I'm sorry, I didn't know that anyone lived here."

Relieved at Washu's courteous demeanor, the woman's expression softened slightly. "It's all right. It's natural not to realize when it's in such disrepair."

Washu felt that something was amiss, though she could not pinpoint it.

"But I don't get many visitors. Are you interested in old things?"

"Yes... Does this observatory belong to you?"

"It belonged to my late husband. He liked everything old, especially this observatory. I don't really know the details, but he found it on a planet somewhere and had it relocated."

"Um, my name is Hakubi Washu. I hope you don't mind my request, but could I please use this observatory?"

"Hakubi Washu-san... Aren't you the youngest student ever admitted into the Department of Philosophy?"

"Yes..." Washu, blushing from embarrassment, nodded. It seemed she was famous even out here. "I don't have the money right now, but could I possibly trade you my house for it?" Washu had received patent fees from Ikuma, but she had spent them almost completely on equipment and material costs. The next bank transfer was in three months. That was why she offered an exchange instead.

"But your house is... Well, come this way." Beckoning to Washu, the woman started walking through the wicket and down the hedged path.

"Wow!!" Washu inadvertently raised her voice. Beyond the wicket was a vantage point with a full view of the residential area where she lived and the Department of Philosophy campus.

"The largest house over there is yours, isn't it?" The old woman pointed at the residence. Looking down upon it, Washu realized for the first time that it was more unlike the surrounding houses than the street-level view had led her to believe. The old woman chuckled. "Your house would be worth more, even if you traded it for the whole farm."

"Well, I'm the one who wants the trade..."

“Why are you so interested in this observatory...?”

Washu gazed fondly up at the observatory and touched its wall. “It’s very similar to what I had back home. That’s where I used to live.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes!”

“Heh, our new philosopher has strange interests.”

“I thought I was normal... Is it strange...?”

“You have a wide breadth of interests. Heh heh...” The woman laughed when she saw Washu pout with discontent. For a moment, her kind laughter reminded Washu of her mother back home. “But I’m sorry...”

“It’s all right,” said Washu. “Is it very important to you?”

“That’s not what I...” the old woman hesitated. “No, I suppose it isn’t.”

“At any rate, the mechanical parts are quite rusted.” Washu commented, judging by the machinery she could see from the window.

“Since my husband passed away, there haven’t been any technicians who could handle its maintenance.”

“Will you allow me to do it?”

“But...”

“It’ll double as part of my studies.”

The old woman held back at first, but gave in to Washu’s insistence, and entrusted the observatory to her care.

From that day onward, Washu visited every day for interior maintenance. As the one-month mark approached...

“Are you really going to give me this farm, Nana?!”

“Yes.”

“Thank you so much!” Washu was ecstatic.

“Hold on... There’s something I want you to know.” The old woman looked confused. “I didn’t really want to say this...”

She proceeded to relate that a part of the land was mortgaged for a debt, and if she could not pay by the due date, the land would be taken as collateral. The real estate broker knew that she was unable to pay and had extended the date on purpose to mortgage the rest of the land as interest, trying to take it all. To the woman, this was not just her home but also a precious place containing all her memories of her late husband. She did not want to sell to anyone, but it pained her to let the land go to waste. She had asked a different local real estate agent to look for a good buyer, but there hadn't been any market demand.

"I wish you had told me sooner..."

"I'm very happy with your offer. I've been turning you down because I didn't want to get you involved in this mess. I'm sorry..."

"Don't give up, Nana. It'll be fine! I'll protect this land."

"Washu-san..."

"Don't worry." There was still time before the due date. Washu considered selling her own property to use the money to pay back the loan. But nobody came to buy her house.

"Washu-sama's property is first-rate, even around here, and given the house's high quality...not everybody could afford it." The man who answered her inquiries when she went to investigate was rather blunt.

"Then we could lower the price..."

"N-no!" He raised his voice, almost upset.

"Why not? If I, as owner..."

"Well...there might be a buyer at a lower price point. But...this is awkward to say...it would prompt a drop in real estate prices. It would decrease the value of other properties... I assure you, we're taking the appropriate steps, and we're making calls to a variety of people. Please be patient."

Washu left the office with some doubts, and soon, the due date was a few days away. Growing tired of waiting, Washu was about to march back over to the office when Naja appeared, tears streaming down her face. Without any

preamble, she abruptly stormed in, knocking down the butler. “Wasn’t I your friend, Washu-chan?!”

Washu was so flabbergasted that she inadvertently said, “No.”

“!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” Naja froze as if time had stopped.

After a moment of silence, Washu finally opened her mouth to say, “I’m joking, Naja-san.”

“Washu-chan, you’re so mean...” Naja said faintly, squatting and tracing curlicues on the floor with her finger.

“Well, when you burst in here like that, anyone would’ve been taken aback. It was a reflex...”

“Was I that fierce...?”

“Yes.” Washu showed Naja the footage from the security camera.

After a moment of silence, Naja accepted Washu’s claim. “I did look scary... Oh, what did I come here for?”

“Well, I heard, ‘Wasn’t I your friend?!’”

“Wasn’t I your friend... Yes, that’s it!!” Naja clapped her hands as she remembered her business. “After you said, ‘Of *course* you’re my friend,’ I was supposed to say, ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were selling your house?!’”

“Are you saying it’s my fault you forgot what you came here for?”

“Enough with the comedy! Anyway, about the real estate broker...”

“There’s a place I really wanted.”

“I know. That farm in the suburbs, right? Why didn’t you come talk to me about it right away?”

“So that’s how this leads to the topic of our friendship.”

“Yes!! You’re so cold.”

A subdued response...that was the method she had found worked best to deal with Naja.

“Washu-chan, you meanie... Anyway, this house isn’t going to sell, no matter

how long you wait. Not until that farm gets foreclosed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Washu-chan, you’re such an easy mark...” According to Naja, the farm’s mortgage holder, and the real estate broker in charge of all property sales for the area where Washu lived, shared a parent company. Drawing up the paperwork delayed the sale of Washu’s house so that she would miss the due date. Similar tricks were used so a buyer would not be found for the farm. “That real estate broker wants to raze the whole farm to build a high-end residential zone.”

The area where Washu lived, which had increased in status due to the Department of Philosophy’s presence, was quite popular. But residential construction was restricted for habitat protection, with limited areas for expansion. The old woman’s farm, though in the suburbs, was close to the city, with scenic views, and thus qualified as prime real estate. It was small for a farm, but if rezoned into a residential district, it would be converted into several hundred residential parcels.

“But what could be done about it now?” Washu asked. “Do we even have any choice but to go through the local real estate broker?”

“Maybe not on other planets. But this is the Jurai Imperial Academy.” Naja proudly patted Washu’s shoulder. “I’ll show you just what kind of presence the Department of Philosophy has in the Academy.”

“What do you mean?” Washu felt uneasy at Naja’s cryptic reply.

“It’s not a big deal, Washu-kun.”

“P-Professor Ikuma?!”

Ikuma was standing in the doorway of the living room. “I did knock... May I come in?”

“Of course. I apologize for not hearing you...” Naja’s grimace did not escape Washu’s notice. “What brings you here today?”

“Same as Naja-kun. I heard that you offered to trade this house for that farm. I found out before Naja-kun...but her youth and vigor beat me here.”

So that's why Naja-san came running in like that, thought Washu.

"Professor, you meanie!"

"I understand that you want Washu-kun to see that she can depend on you." Ikuma smiled meaningfully at Naja.

"Professor!!"

"Sorry, sorry." Ikuma scratched his forehead and turned to Washu. "Washu-kun, the Department of Philosophy is indeed special, but what's more important is that this is the Imperial Academy, a school."

"Oh!"

"That real estate broker was appointed by Jurai. He ought to act solely in the students' interests."

"I see what you mean!" Washu shouted, standing up. Finally, she'd found a breakthrough in the situation.

Behind her, Naja was tracing curlicues on the ground with her finger. "I wanted to say those things," she muttered in a tiny voice.

A few hours later, Professor Ikuma revoked the real estate broker's control over the area around Washu's mansion.

"Thank you for doing this for me..." Washu said.

"Don't worry about it," Professor Ikuma replied. "Their antics were getting to be too much. In fact, there have been many student complaints. This was a good opportunity."

"Some rich idiots raising the prices of land, making it too expensive for students to live... It defeats the whole purpose of the place," Naja declared. "You know what was hilarious, when we looked into their business affairs? *Clay* was the substantive manager of the parent company."

"Well, being a miser is his style," Professor Ikuma said.

"If only he would turn his passion for money toward his research."

"Ha ha. Naja-kun, greed and avarice are Clay's driving forces. Without them,

he would no longer be himself.”

Washu, listening to their chatting, shivered. *I can understand how Nana could think we're all weird.* She felt that their standards and values were different from hers.

“Leave this matter to us,” Professor Ikuma urged her. “Go share the news with the woman at the farm.”

“I will. Thank you, Professor Ikuma.” Washu ran off towards the farm at a speed that far surpassed the Academy women’s track-and-field sprint record.

Ikuma watched and smiled. “May she never lose that golden heart.”

Beside him, Naja traced curlicues on the ground with her finger and muttered in a tiny whisper, “Argh, he did it to me again.”



“Perhaps it’s not so easy with you around, Naja-kun,” Professor Ikuma said.

“I wanted to say those things!” Naja protested. “Professor, I hate you.”

Washu opened the door to the observatory and gave the old woman the news. Then she made a proposal. “It would be lonely to live here by myself. Won’t you live here with me?”

And so, Washu bought the farm and started living with the old woman, its former owner. The butler and the maids followed.

“Why...?” Washu asked, surprised.

“We aren’t servants of the *house*,” the butler explained. “We were hired to help your studies proceed smoothly, as part of your scholarship.” Dressed as if they had run away under cover of night were one hundred and fifty maids, all lined up.

“Yoo-hoo, Washu-chan!” Naja turned up uninvited, solely because she had fallen in love with the observatory. Washu put the dilapidated farm back together and acquired livestock to start it working once again. The once-desolate farm now teemed with life.

“I never imagined I would be doing this at my age,” remarked the butler, laughing as he led a cow. The maids also seemed to be pleased. Washu dove onto her bed, looking at the stars from the windows of the observatory. Feeling a sense of relief for the first time since she came to the Academy, she fell into a deep sleep...

Mikamo

A year had passed since Washu came to the Department of Philosophy. She had advanced to Class 3, receiving credit for her work done thus far. In Class 3, she received qualifications as an assistant professor and could teach on behalf of a professor for students up to Class 8. Of course, that was also a part of the curriculum in Class 3.

Naja approached Washu as she exited the classroom. "This is amazing, Washu-chan. You're already in Class 3."

"Naja, you're advancing to Class 4 while working in the Student Union."

"It's all thanks to you. You must have a gift for teaching. I hear the elementary students you're in charge of have vastly improved their grades."

A nearby elementary school had invited Washu to visit as a special lecturer. The kids she met when they renovated the hot springs pool at the mansion, her former residence, attended that school. "I often end up learning from them instead."

"Because they come up with ideas you don't?"

"That's true, but I feel like they teach me to look at things with fresh eyes. People in the Department often have entrenched viewpoints."

"Washu-chan, you're in the Department, too."

"Exactly. I'm not sure how to put this, but with each passing day, I feel I get more *infected*," Washu said, fixing her eyes on Naja.

"I know, right?" said Naja, as though she were not part of the problem. She did not get Washu's sarcasm. "But that's not all, is it?"

Washu was unsettled at Naja's probing query. "What do you mean?"

"It's just my intuition. What do you think of my perspective? Do I have fresh eyes?"

"I suppose you could say that."

“You can always talk to me about it.”

“You, in Class 4?”

“Whatever happened to the innocent little Washu I used to know?”

“You strapped her to a rocket and sent her up into space.” Washu stopped beating around the bush.

“Ha ha. You had it in you all along.”

“I didn’t want this kind of talent.” They looked at each other and laughed.

“You can always feel free to talk. I *am* older than you.”

“Thanks, Naja.”

Leaving Naja, Washu exited the building and squinted at the sunshine. She thought of Niwase Mikamo...

Washu had several favorite spots around campus. Small spaces just for her, where she would erect a simple force field so that nobody would disturb her. Then, one day, there was an intruder in her little world.

A certain weeping willow-like tree had thin branches that cascaded to the ground like a screen, forming a giant umbrella ten meters in diameter. Washu was letting her imagination run wild there when, suddenly, a young man pushed aside the branches and entered.

“Huh...?”

“Oh! S-sorry!!” The man was more surprised than Washu, and, with an apology, hurried away.

“Hold on, not that way!” Washu knew there was a cliff in that direction, so she hastily called out to stop him. But then...

“Waaaargh!!”

What she heard was not the man’s reply, but his scream as he almost fell off the cliff. With Washu’s help, he struggled back up, panting hard. “I-I thought I was going to die...”

“You’re so clumsy...Niwase Mikamo-kun.”

“H-how did you know my name?” the man stared at Washu. Her intense eyes, her flaming red hair, her bewitching curves: “beautiful” was the only word to describe her. She was a woman whom one would never forget, but Mikamo did not remember ever meeting her before.

“The sun is too bright there... Come this way,” smiled Washu. She entered the umbrella of branches, beckoning to Mikamo.

“Um...” Mikamo remained outside the umbrella, transfixed, and not knowing what to do.

“What...?”

“I-I apologize for my earlier transgression. I was walking, lost in thought... I entered a woman’s room without knocking...”

Washu listened and then burst out laughing. “This isn’t my room. Come on in.”

“But, well...”

“You don’t want to be here with me?”

“That’s not true at all!!”

Washu chuckled as she teased him. He was so serious, and she liked his innocence and courtesy. “I’m amazed you actually got in. I had a simple force field set up... Did it break?”

“Um... I don’t think it’s broken. When I get lost in thought, I often find myself in places I shouldn’t be able to enter. Professor Ikuma told me that there’s a deviation in the probability constant...” Mikamo sheepishly hung his head. He’d evidently experienced this many times.

“Sounds like a subject Professor Ikuma would like to research. Just be careful that he doesn’t vivisect you, Mikamo-kun.”

“Pardon me, but how do you know my name? I thought this was our first meeting.”

“In the first class I taught, there was a student in a sunny seat who slept

comfortably from the beginning to the end of the lecture. His name was Niwase Mikamo.” Washu taunted him with a devilish smile.

Mikamo realized what she was getting at. “Um...are you Washu-sensei?” Washu nodded, and Mikamo jolted to attention, bowing repeatedly. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! That day, I was... well...”

“That seat is very comfortable in this particular season. The sun hits it just right. I like that seat, too.” Washu smiled, and Mikamo smiled back, a little embarrassed. The bells signifying the end of lunch hour rang. Washu picked up her things and looked at Mikamo. “But if you fall asleep in my class again...I’ll vivisect you.”

Mikamo froze. Washu smiled, winked, and left.

From that day onwards, Mikamo stayed awake through Washu’s classes. That was how they met. Even now, whenever she looked at Mikamo, Washu thought back to how flustered he was that day and almost burst out laughing.

Several hundred kilometers away from the Department of Philosophy’s main buildings were facilities built several thousand years ago. That area was another of Washu’s favorites. Since the university’s campus spanned the whole planet, one department having jurisdiction over an entire continent was not rare. The Department of Philosophy was as large as Earth’s continent of Africa. If anyone, whether student or professor, was making use of a structure, no matter how old, it would never be demolished, and was always repaired.

This abandoned schoolhouse was another place Professor Ikuma gave to Washu. Her dogged pursuit of the observatory indicated to him that she would like something like that. The building was built several thousand years ago as a mortared frame house, but the timber was specially processed to withstand millennia of weathering. This was Washu’s secret hideout.

The reason why she liked this place so much was the library full of old books. When she had the time, she would get lost in the stacks, reading for hours. Today, too...

“Who’s there?!” Washu was deciphering some old, obsolete texts when she

heard the creaking of the floor and braced herself. There should be nobody else in the library. “Is anyone there?”

“Washu-sensei?” Mikamo peered out from behind the bookshelf.

“Y-you! What are *you* doing here?”

“I came to read. Washu-sensei, what are *you* doing here?”

“I came to read, too... Heh!” Washu burst out laughing at the silly conversation. “It should be obvious that we came to read at a library. That’s not what I was asking. Oh, well... I won’t ask how you got in here. But this is my private place.”

“I didn’t know... I’m sorry. I’ll leave right now.”

“We come across each other in the oddest places. All right, I’ll give you special permission to visit this spot,” Washu said, stopping Mikamo. “I don’t know very many people who read physical books.” At that point, paperbound books were the equivalent of frescos, lithographs, or parchment scrolls on Earth. They were viewed more as archeology than sources of information.

Realizing that Washu was interested, Mikamo spoke. “Um, we actually had a room like this at my parents’ house. I’ve loved it ever since I was little. I don’t know why, but it makes me feel at peace... The weight of the books in my hands, the sound the paper makes when I turn the page, and how it feels in my fingers... The lettering that’s like a work of art itself, and the photographs. It’s all wonderful.” Mikamo closed his eyes and stroked the book he held with affection.

Washu continued where he left off. “I like how you can see the amount of knowledge contained therein, not just check a pile of numbers. It’s sublime, as if it has a soul. And...”

As Washu was about to continue, Mikamo lifted his face. With a flash of insight, he spoke with her in unison: “I love the smell of old books.”

Even their voices were in harmony. Washu and Mikamo looked into each other’s eyes. A moment later, they simultaneously burst out laughing. “Ha ha... All right, Mikamo-kun. You’re the first member of the Book-Lovers Club and are permitted into this sanctuary.”

“Thank you... Um...”

“What?”

“If I’m Member Number One, what are you, Washu-sensei?”

“I’m the advisor,” Washu winked and laughed. Was it fate? At that moment, Mikamo secured a place within Washu’s heart.

“Welcome home. Did something good happen, Washu-chan?” Naja had been waiting for Washu to return to the observatory.

“Something good? No, not particularly...” Washu could not help smiling. It was quite obvious that something had happened.

“Oh?” Naja looked at Washu quizzically.

“Wh-what? What’s wrong?” Washu did not realize the cause of her own good mood.

“Oh, Washu-sama. Your dinner is ready.” Before Naja could say anything else, Mei the maid came to summon them.

“Thanks. I’ll be right there,” Washu answered and went to her room to change with a spring in her step.

Naja, watching her closely, had a gleam in her eye. “I sense romance!!” she stood up and declared loudly, to nobody in particular.

“What? Washu-sama has a boyfriend?” Without missing a beat, the maids surrounded Naja. “Is that true? She didn’t seem different from usual.”

“I think so, too!” another maid said.

“You’re not putting thought into this,” a third interjected. “With some insight, the answer is obvious!”

“Wow.”

“Ha ha ha! You can’t fool me, Washu-chan!!” Naja proclaimed loudly, egged on by the maids.

“Lucky...” Mei mumbled, and they all fell silent. Not a single one of them had a

boyfriend herself.

“Was his name Niwase Mikamo-kun?” Naja blurted out, and Washu almost lost her soup.

Remaining calm and wiping her mouth with a napkin, Washu looked at Naja, who was staring at her meaningfully.

Naja had gotten hold of his profile, something not even Washu knew about. “Niwase Mikamo, foreign exchange student, born on the planet Shitori. Twenty-seven years old. Actually, he’s the third son of a distinguished aristocratic family on Shitori... The Department admitted him on his own merits, which is rare for an international goodwill exchange student. I can see that, with Assistant Professor Hakubi Washu-sensei’s personal instruction, his grades and assessments will go through the roof.”

“Wh-what do you mean, personal instruction?!” Washu stood up, slamming the table.

“I was just stating the objective facts.” Naja nonchalantly looked away.

“There’s nothing between us. He just happened to come to my library...” Washu sat back down, clenching her fists, refusing to go along with Naja’s suggestion.

“You summoned him to your library? I see.”

“Stop taking notes! And you’re distorting my words. You call yourself a philosopher?”

“I’m just inferring the essence of the matter.”

“Let me set you straight.” Standing up again, Washu noticed Mei and the other maids listening from the shadows, ears pricked with great interest.

“Congratulations, Washu-sama!!”

“Wh-what?”

“We knew this day would come, though not so soon.”

“Hey, what do you think you’re...” Washu began.

“We’re so jealous!”

“I’m happy for you, but I still have mixed feelings!” The maids looked at her with approval and envy in their eyes.

“Th-there’s nothing between us...”

“She said ‘us!!’” they squealed.

Nothing Washu could say would change their minds now. Naja watched Washu being congratulated (or, in other words, mobbed) by the maids. In her mind, Washu’s future was being meticulously plotted, from Washu first realizing of her feelings, to her first date with Mikamo, to the pair sleeping together, getting engaged, getting married, and starting a family. But Washu was oblivious to all of that.

“There’s really nothing!” Naja and the maids would not listen to Washu’s denials. She felt an incomprehensible sense of defeat at her failure to communicate, but the event also prodded her feelings forward a little.

The club activities continued at the library with Washu and Mikamo spending time alone together. Mikamo knew how to make people comfortable. In the library, which was Washu’s space, Mikamo’s presence was not invasive... Or rather, she felt no sense of violation of her space. That was true despite the fact that Washu felt extremely self-conscious thanks to Naja and the maids.

Mikamo was also a good student, and Washu a good teacher. In no time, there was nothing else for her to teach him. And yet, no matter how careful they were, there was no cure for Mikamo’s klutziness. To Washu, he was a student who achieved satisfying results. At the same time, however, he was a handful. At first, they were still of kindred minds, and Washu was careful to avoid romantic feelings because of what had happened with Naja and the maids. Of course, having accepted him into her heart already, there was no way she could put the brakes on her feelings.

One day, Naja came to Washu’s room and blurted out, “Washu-chan, you shouldn’t...get too involved with him.”

“What’s this all of a sudden? You used to harp on me about going out with him... But seriously, we’re not like that.”

“I hope not...”

“...?” Washu noticed that Naja was acting strangely. The notorious comedian was being uncharacteristically serious. *Is this a new form of harassment?*

“Say... We’re going to have a party. Won’t you come? Everyone wants to see you. You never go to these get-togethers, Washu-chan. This time, there’ll be a lot of promising guys from other departments. Come on, what do you say?”

“O-okay...” Although she felt unsatisfied, Washu accepted Naja’s suggestion.

But then, from that day forward, she started to observe Mikamo and Naja together. They were not friendly with each other. In fact, they were somewhat awkward in their interactions. Washu felt Naja was hiding something from her, but she did not ask her friend directly. Even now, Mikamo had gone somewhere with Naja. Left behind, Washu had no choice but to sit in the dining hall and organize her research.

“I’m just not in the mood...” She pushed her chair back and looked around, sipping her tea. Then she almost spat it out. Clay was approaching her with several of his colleagues.

Washu had a difficult time dealing with Clay. It was not that she disliked him, but unlike Mikamo, Clay’s way of thinking and actions felt exceedingly stifling to her. Instinctively, she hid behind a pillar.

“Well, I suppose that, no matter how talented she is, Naja-kun is still a woman.” Clay spoke loudly on purpose, knowing that Washu was there.

“That egghead? I can’t believe it.”

“According to what I’ve learned, that man’s been frequenting Naja-kun’s personal laboratory for the past few weeks, especially at night, clandestinely.” Clay’s colleagues went *oooh*. “Heh heh, those two are going out, mark my words. Poor Washu-kun. She’s been betrayed by her best friend *and* her lover.”

People knew that Clay was practically a walking tabloid magazine. Usually, Washu would pay no heed. But today...

Washu stayed hidden until Clay and his gang left, and then clutched her things and fled. Soon, she saw Naja and Mikamo taking a walk in the rear gardens. Washu stiffened, unable to move. Clay's words echoed in her mind. Washu silently watched them look around furtively and enter Naja's laboratory. She did not understand why she felt so sad.

"Were you out walking with Naja earlier?" Three hours later, Washu approached Mikamo as he was looking something up in the library and nonchalantly started a conversation.

"Naja-san? No," Mikamo replied coolly. It bothered Washu that he showed not a hint of emotional turmoil. Gentle, klutzy... but there were times when he seemed incredibly cold.

"Oh. It was too far for me to see clearly... Hey, Naja invited me to a party. Want to go?"

"Huh? I don't mind. But am I invited?"

"It'll be a big party, so nobody will notice. I'll let Naja know."

"Thanks."

The peaceful conversation set Washu at ease. "Some books I ordered are arriving tomorrow. Do you have any plans?"

"The ones you said were slated to be discarded...? Oh, sorry, Professor Ikuma needs me tomorrow. I might be late."

"No problem. It's just unpacking. No big deal."

"Sorry. I'll go to the party as soon as I'm done."

Washu left soon afterwards, not wanting to disturb Mikamo's studies, and did not notice that he sighed deeply as he saw her off.

The next day, unexpected departmental business detained Washu. Naja had not come home the night before, and since Washu was behind already, she headed to Naja's lab to tell her about Mikamo. On the way, she spotted

Professor Ikuma and ran over.

“Professor Ikuma, didn’t you have work to do with Mikamo-kun?”

“Mikamo-kun? No, not really...”

“Oh, okay...”

“Is anything the matter?”

“No, I misunderstood.” Washu left as though fleeing the scene, leaving behind a perplexed Ikuma. She mulled over Mikamo’s lie while she walked. *It doesn’t bother me if they’re going out...* And yet, she found herself heading towards Naja’s laboratory.

But she could not bring herself to step inside. Instead, she paced by the door. Mikamo, Ikuma, and Clay’s words kept ringing in her mind, and she could not shake herself free. She hated everything: Mikamo’s lies, Naja’s incomprehensible actions, and her own unclear feelings. At that moment, she stopped in her tracks.

“I shouldn’t do this... It’s none of my business.” She tried to make a quick exit, but Clay stopped her short.

“What are you doing here, Washu-kun? Mikamo-kun is in Naja-kun’s laboratory.” Clay said deliberately.

“...!!” Washu froze at the words she did not want to hear.

In that exact moment, Naja and Mikamo opened the laboratory door and emerged. Eyes wide, they stared at Washu. The moment lasted an eternity.

Then Washu uttered, voice trembling, “You didn’t have to lie... It doesn’t matter...to me...” Tears swam in her eyes. “It doesn’t!!” She could not bear to linger any longer and ran.

“Washu-san!” Mikamo was flustered at the turn of events. “Wh-what should I do, Naja-san?!”

“Go after her, you idiot!!”

“R-right!!” Naja and Mikamo ran after Washu.

Naja saw Clay smirking close by, immediately realized what he had done, and

directed her anger at him. In other words, she kicked Clay into the fountain outside the window. “Oops, sorry! I’m in a hurry!!”

They set off after Washu right away, but she was nowhere to be found in the building. She had probably run off at a speed that was three times the Academy women’s sprinting record.

“Washu-chan looks calm and collected, but she’s more immature than she seems!” Naja panted heavily, looking at the buildings lit orange in the sunset. Mikamo, slightly behind her, tried to catch his breath, dripping with sweat.

“I can’t find...Washu-san anywhere.”

“Do you have any idea where she might be?”

“Oh...”

“You do!”

“If this really is a misunderstanding, and if she has feelings for me...” Here, Mikamo collected himself. “But...”

“Stop that! I’m sure your upbringing forced you to learn to suppress your emotions... But, for right now, get properly flustered and find her!”

“O-okay!” Mikamo took off running again.

“Hold on, I’ll go, too.”

“You can’t.”

“What?”

“Only Washu-san and I can go in there!” Mikamo yelled.

Naja clicked her tongue and watched him, and then grumpily ran towards her office so she could take out what had happened on Clay...

Washu was in a dimly lit room, the only light coming from a bare lightbulb. She sat in a chair, clutching her knees to her chest, and curled up into a little ball, thousands of books piled haphazardly around her. Washu was in the abandoned building’s library... Yes, the Book-Lovers Club, Washu and Mikamo’s sanctuary. How many hours had she sat there like that? Washu’s lips kept

silently mouthing the word, “Idiot...”

Suddenly, creaking floorboards prompted her to lift her head. “Who’s there?!” She realized that the approaching shadow was Mikamo and hastily prepared to escape.

“Wait! Please, listen to me.”

“It’s not like I feel anything for you...”

“I still love you, Washu-san!”

Those words rang hollow in Washu’s heart. “Liar...!”

“Yes, I’m a liar... But what I just said is the truth.”

Washu’s green eyes saw his sincerity. If only she could leap into his arms. She would feel such relief and happiness. But she only cast her eyes downwards.

“That’s not fair. I love Naja, too.”

“I like Naja-san, too. But it’s not the same as the feelings I have for you. Naja called me out for being a liar, and she was scolding me for it.”

“...”

“There’s nothing between me and Naja-san.”

Washu simply stood there. She wanted to believe Mikamo, but she also felt that something still did not make sense. Emotions were too complicated for a simple, mathematical answer. She had only just now become aware of her own feelings.

At Washu’s continued silence, Mikamo looked at her, sighed, and placed his foot on a ledge.

“What are you doing?! That’s dangerous!” They were on the first floor, but there was a cliff underneath the window. A fall would be fatal.

“It’s all right. Naja-san told me she would kill me if I ever made you cry. She’s not here, so I can do it myself...!!”

“What are you saying?!”

“I’m sorry.”

“All right! I believe you!!”

“Really?!” The moment Mikamo cheerfully turned around, the window frame gave way under his weight and cracked.

“...?!”

“...?!”

In that instant, they exchanged a look.

“You idiot!!!!”

As Washu yelled, Mikamo’s body fell into the abyss... Or rather, tumbled into the room.

“Oww...” Mikamo propped himself up, rubbing his head.

Washu kept staring at him, dumbfounded, then started trembling. “You idiot!!” Once she realized he was safe, anger welled up inside her.

“Ow! Huh...? Ow ow ow!!”

Washu slapped both his cheeks repeatedly. “Idiot!” With the last slap, she caught her breath, and then her expression transitioned from anger to a relieved smile. “You’re such an idiot...” She pressed her tear-stained face into his chest.

Feeling her warmth against him, he softly drew her into an embrace and whispered, “I’m sorry...”

Washu lifted her face and looked into Mikamo’s eyes. If he were any other man, there would be no need to think further. But he had to let Washu make a choice. “Washu-san, I was born on Seniwa.”

Washu’s expression wavered. His words revealed everything. Now, she understood what Mikamo and Naja were trying to tell her before.

Seniwa was a superpower with 943 alliances, large and small. It was affiliated with the Galactic Federation, which was currently embroiled in a cold war with Jurai. Furthermore, Seniwa was especially strict on immigration; it had practically closed its borders. Why was someone from there *here*, at their

biggest enemy's greatest think tank? It was clear he was not a spy. He might have been savvy, but Jurai would not be ignorant of something even Naja knew. Mikamo's occasional coldness was the result of training to suppress his emotions.

"I'm from Seniwa," Mikamo said again, looking into Washu's eyes.

"And..."

"Huh?"

"And...so what...?" Washu mumbled. No matter what the truth was, Mikamo was right here in front of her. That was the most important thing to Washu.

Their faces drew closer together. They kissed, deeply, over and over. Their warm breath tickled each other's cheeks. They needed no words. They only needed to give themselves wholly to each other.

The next day, Naja saw them together and sighed. "Everyone's on your side. Don't ever forget that."

On the day of the party, Mikamo secretly proposed to Washu in the garden. He had received permission to marry from his grandfather, the family patriarch. However, at this stage, she was only considered a "prospective marriage candidate." A formal union needed to wait until after Seniwa officially opened its borders.

However, the students did not give a damn about international affairs. Once Naja—ever the astute observer—discovered the engagement, a party was not only inevitable, but necessary. The boisterous merrymaking continued until the next morning. The day after that, everyone in the Academy knew about Washu and Mikamo.

When Washu and Naja returned to the farm, both nursing their hungover heads, a Jurai intelligence operative was there with Professor Ikuma to greet them. They told Washu and Naja the gist of the story. It came with a strict gag order, of course. Seniwa might have been in a semi-isolated state, but cultural

exchanges at the private civilian level still occurred. To Seniwa's aristocracy, studying abroad at the Jurai Imperial Academy was a status symbol. Other countries wanted to maintain some sort of contact, too.

There were some parties in both worlds who were not amenable to such contact. However, there was a system in place to get around that. It used names and records assigned by Jurai to enroll special Seniwa exchange students in the school. As a result of that steady, painstaking process, the faction pushing to open up the country was gaining strength. Under the guidance of Kuramitsu, the current leader in power, efforts were underway to open Seniwa's borders, and there had even been secret talks with Jurai about the possibility of Seniwa joining the Federation.

"I see. So you thought the couple could be used for propaganda at the civilian level to encourage opening the country?" Naja, understanding, glared sidelong at Ikuma.

"Now, don't reproach us so openly. We were all affected by this whole incident."

"Hakubi Washu-dono...please, this would be for Seniwa and Jurai." The intelligence operative next to Ikuma bowed his head.

"Well, I mean, as long as we can stay together, it's no problem..." Washu said hesitantly.

"But the Jurai intelligence bureau sure sounds like a third-rate tabloid," Naja interjected.

"If it comes with information, no matter what kind, it's all under our jurisdiction," the operative answered with a wry smile.

"Aren't you glad, Washu-chan?" Naja smirked. "Jurai might pay for all your expenses from now on."

"Just so we're clear, there won't be any for you, Naja-san." Washu retorted.

"Feh. You're such a cheapskate."

Laughing at Naja's pout, Ikuma gave her the news. "Don't get so mad. As of today, Naja-kun is a special scholarship student."

“What?! Is that true, Professor?!”

Disregarding Naja’s dance of joy, the operative turned to face Washu. “You will be placed under surveillance, starting today, but we will try to remain discreet. Please forgive us in advance.”

She did not even have to ask to know that she had been a person of interest before and was already under surveillance. However, it was true that they had been discreet, so she did not care. Still, Washu did not notice the *real* reason why the intelligence bureau was there and why Naja was in attendance...

The faction in favor of opening Seniwa’s borders may have seemed strong, but that was solely because of Kuramitsu. In fact, things were very uncertain. Kuramitsu’s son, the next head of state, was reluctant to open the country. If anything happened to Kuramitsu, the situation would be turned upside down.

None of that mattered to Washu. Only a sense of happiness predominated. The one unfortunate thing was that, because of the regulation of information, she could not tell her mother on Kanamitsu about Mikamo.

A month later, Washu’s pregnancy was confirmed.

“We’ll have to make this legitimate, Washu-chan!” Naja was ecstatic. It was obvious what she planned to do.

“No!!” Washu opposed her friend vehemently, and the wedding was performed on the farm, among a small inner circle of friends. There was no telling what would have happened if it had been left to Naja.

“I would never do something so tactless,” Naja smiled.

Washu did not fail to notice Naja’s trembling clenched fists.

“Why are you leaving?” Washu asked Naja, who was packing her belongings after the wedding.

“What are you talking about? I can’t be a third wheel.”

“You do know how many people live here?” At the farm, there were over a hundred maids and a butler. It did not matter whether Naja left or not.

“Hmph.”

Watching Naja, Washu realized she was pouting partly because Washu had robbed her of a party. Still, it was mostly true that Naja also did not want to intrude on Washu and Mikamo’s newlywed life. Washu hugged Naja from behind and whispered into her ear as she kissed her cheek. “Naja, I want to show off my happiness to you. Please stay. ♥”

“F-fine! I’ll interfere, you know!!”

“Okay. ♥”

And so Naja chose to remain at the farm, just as before.

Unfortunately, Washu and Mikamo still did not have permission to visit Seniwa or Kanamitsu due to the unstable situation.

Nine months later, Washu gave birth to a boy. His name was Mikumo.

That was the happiest time in Washu’s life—when they were a family of three.

Mikumo

Mikamo started acting weird when Mikumo was about to turn seven months old. A few weeks after that milestone, the news arrived at the Academy that Representative Kuramitsu of Seniwa had ordered a complete turnaround of his previous policies. Seniwa's new isolationist policy now closed off their country to the outside world.

"It's all right," Mikamo assured Washu. "I have asylum. If it gets worse, I can get citizenship here right away."

"But then your family..." Washu started.

"Sure, I'm worried, but... I mean, it's nothing to brag about, but this kind of thing happens a lot in my country. I know how to deal with this."

Washu was relieved to hear that. A month later, however, Mikamo left to go on a walk with Mikumo and never returned.



It was a sunny day. Washu had been out of town, giving a lecture in a neighboring city at Naja's request. When she returned to the farm in the evening, her husband and son were already gone. According to the butler, Mikamo had taken Mikumo on a walk right after Washu departed. Before noon, he called to say, "I want to show Mikumo the ocean, so I'll be back late."

"Good grief, not again," laughed Washu to the butler. Mikamo had a tendency to take Mikumo on adventures on a whim, so she did not think of the excursion as a big deal. When the sun set, however, she started to feel uneasy. Unable to contain herself, she ran outside.

As if waiting for her, Akara Naja was standing there.

"Naja! Mikamo and Mikumo haven't come home yet. Will you look for them with—" She tried to start running, but Naja grabbed her arm. "Naja...?"

Naja looked at her silently, but her grip was firm. The expression on her face told Washu what had happened.

"You *know*...don't you?!" Washu shook Naja's shoulders and yelled. "Where are they?! Where did they go?!" She shook her again and again. "Answer me!!"

Naja averted her eyes but spoke in a voice Washu could clearly hear. "They went home..."

"...!!" Washu tried to run, and Naja embraced her. "Let go. Let me go!!"

"It's too late..."

"No!!" With a roar of anger, Washu shoved Naja aside.

"Washu!!"

Washu looked up at the sky. She knew that, if she used her powers, she could make it there. Powers inside her that she had never used... That she had even forgotten she had. She must use those powers to bring back Mikamo and Mikumo!!

The moment she tried to do so, however, something kept stopping her.

That would only repeat the same thing all over again.

"...!!"

That would only repeat the same thing all over again.

“...!!”

That would only repeat the same thing all over again.

“...!!”

THAT WOULD ONLY REPEAT THE SAME THING ALL OVER AGAIN.

Washu opened her eyes wide. She could not defy the voice inside her. All the sadness and turmoil in the world could not sever the chains of those words. Losing all strength, she collapsed to the ground.

“Why...?” Washu mumbled, neither to herself nor Naja.

Naja picked herself off the ground and said, “Niwase Mikamo’s real name is Kuramitsu Mikamo.”

“...!!” Washu turned to face Naja, aghast.

“Yes, he’s the grandson of Chairman Kuramitsu, of Seniwa’s supreme council. The chairman died last month. The person on the news is a body double. As you know, Kuramitsu was enthusiastic about opening up the country, and he wanted to do it while he was still alive... So he was quite aggressive about advancing his agenda. But his son Misaka, the next in line, and current de facto leader, is Mikamo’s father. Misaka was against the rapid reforms. And the faction opposed to opening up the country found it hard to accept the fact that Misaka’s son, Mikamo, was at the Academy. Misaka was worried about Mikamo’s future and told him to return home. That meant your son, too, Washu-chan.”

“He said he would stay here...”

“That’s where home is for Mikamo. That’s where his family is.”

“But I...”

“He wanted to leave Mikumo-chan with you, but...” Naja murmured, with downcast eyes. “You’re living in a world that won’t allow you to make decisions by yourself, whether you like it or not. There are a lot of defectors from Seniwa. The ones who supported opening the country, the ones who lost the power struggle. What would happen if they came after Mikumo-chan here? Jurai and

Seniwa consulted with each other and determined that Jurai would take care of you, Washu-chan, and Seniwa would take care of Mikamo-kun and Mikumo-chan. It's ridiculous, but powerful people are always cowards." She noticed that Washu had stood up. "Washu-chan...?"

At that moment, Washu disappeared without a sound. "She teleported?!" Panicking, Naja activated the tracking device on her wristwatch. She had placed the transmitter on Washu when she hugged her. Confirming that the signal came from Washu's library, Naja sighed in relief.

Then her breaths came faster, overwhelming her. Her body trembled.

"I'm sorry, Naja-kun." Professor Ikuma emerged from under the trees.

Naja turned around, shaking. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Professor!! What should I do?!" She clung to him and sobbed.

He gently patted her head. "What a conundrum. Someone as smart as Washu-kun can understand the situation from the perspective of all involved parties, so she can't even bring herself to cry... Poor thing. It's heartbreaking. I thought of her as my own daughter."

"Are you sure you don't mean *granddaughter*?"

"What did you say?"

Hooooonk!!

"H-hey! Don't blow your nose on my sleeve!!" Ikuma bopped Naja lightly on the head.

Naja crouched down, holding her skull. If she did not make light of the situation, she felt that her guilt would crush her.

Ikuma, aware of her feelings, mumbled, "We'll have to let her be for a while." He signaled with his eyes to the butler and the maids. That was the only thing he could do for Washu.

In the dilapidated school's library, Washu stared at the spot where Mikamo used to sit.

Yes... I'm a liar...

She thought back to his words. She now understood what he meant. Jurai, Seniwa, and the Academy. The most powerful countries and institution in the universe. Blocked by those three obstacles, she could not even leave the Academy, much less go to Seniwa. The people she cared about the most were now beyond her reach.

I can't do anything about this the way I am right now. Washu was all too aware of her own helplessness. She curled up on the chair and looked at the jewels on her pendant. Ripping it from around her neck impulsively, she tried to throw it, but her anger suddenly dissipated, and she slumped down into the chair. The jewels slid out of her hand onto the floor.

How many hours did she stay like that? The sun had set long ago. She remained motionless, staring blankly at nothing.

"Washu-chan..." There was the old woman, standing before her. Weakly, Washu turned to her. The old woman sat down next to the empty shell of Washu and said, "Don't be silly. You know you *should* cry at a time like this."

Fat tears tumbled from Washu's eyes, which had moments ago been as blank as a doll's. She started sobbing and clutched the old woman like a small child. She cried out for the first time, awkwardly at first, unable to find a voice. But once she started, her sobs continued unabated, and she wailed her heart out.

How long had it been? Washu awoke to the morning sun shining in her face. She had cried herself to sleep. The old woman had stayed by her side all night and was asleep herself, leaning against a sofa. Washu got up and draped the blanket that had been placed over her on the old woman instead.

"Thank you, Nana."

Washu realized that she had taken on a child's form. She had transformed while crying in her sleep, but she did not feel like turning back. She noticed the fallen jewels beside the sofa and quietly scooped them up. "Heh. I don't know who you are, but you can't keep me down."

There was no use brooding. *I can't do anything right now. But...* Washu was

forming a plan. She started to run and then tripped on her own baggy clothes. “I forgot about my outfit...”

It had been two nights since Washu holed herself up in the library, and Naja had not been able to sleep. She was sitting, spaced out, on the sofa in her lab.

“Guess who?!” Someone covered her eyes from behind.

“Washu-chan?!”

“Ding ding ding!!”

Naja turned around and opened her eyes wide at the sight of Washu. “But you’re so...”

“Are you surprised? You knew I had powers.”

“That’s true, but... Ohhh.” Naja sighed in relief and hugged the small Washu.

“I’m sorry I worried you.”

“I thought you didn’t like me anymore,” Naja said.

“It’s not your fault. But you should wipe that snot off your face.”

“Oops, sorry.” Naja stepped away and blew her nose.

“Say, Naja... I want to see Mikumo,” Washu began, once Naja had calmed down.

“What?”

“I wish I could have him back. But right now, I just want to see him... That’s all.”

“But Mikamo-kun is...”

“I told you, I want to see *Mikumo*, my son.”

Naja stared at Washu in stony silence.

“If I could just have that life back... The three of us, a family. Living our normal, routine lives... Aren’t I terrible? It *was* like that, just a few days ago...

But I've accepted this new reality already."

"But that's..."

"But I've realized that I have a family, too, and a place I call home. So I understand how hard the decision must've been for Mikamo."

"Thank you. It's good to hear that," Naja was grateful that Washu considered her a member of her family.

"Besides, I can easily imagine what Mikamo's parents will do to him, showing up with a baby in tow." Washu glanced sidelong at Naja. "An engagement announcement as soon as he returned home, I suppose. Right, Naja?" She was in complete control of this conversation. A twelve-year-old girl was scolding a grown adult. It was a strange sight. "But I'm worried about how Mikumo will be treated."

"..." It was true, there were no guarantees. Naja thought that Mikumo's treatment would be up to Mikamo and the influence he had.

"If only I had the kind of power that no one could gainsay..." Washu muttered. Naja felt the same. "Anyway," Washu continued, "I've got something to ask of you. Could you introduce me to an Academy grad student?"

"I can't do that. I know what you want to do, but they won't be so easily..."

Academy grad students were chosen from among those who completed their respective departments' coursework. They became the heart of Juraian scientific and technological research. But the sum total of the Department of Philosophy's technology was so varied and complex, no one grad student could grasp it all. There wasn't even an individual with that much knowledge in the military.

And, to top it all off, the Academy grad students were so proud that nobody could control them.

"It's all right! I only want you to introduce *one* person to me."

"...?"

"Actually..." Washu stealthily whispered into Naja's ear.

"Washu-chan...you're so wily." said Naja. And yet, her face broke into a smile.

Clay

The office was surprisingly plain, containing only a garden-variety reception furniture set and a terminal for looking up information. The man who sat facing Washu was slender and bespectacled; to all appearances, a nervous clerical worker. Washu's bosom and crossed legs clearly held his focus, although he hoped she would not notice.

So this is why Naja told me to come here in my adult form, Washu thought.

When she first arrived, the man looked clearly annoyed and eager to shoo away all visitors. As soon as he took a look at Washu, however, he let her in, albeit reluctantly, thanks to her curvaceous good looks.

"Naja...san? Yes, I know her. She's in the Student Union's Information Bureau. She told you about this place... So, what can I do for you?"

"I heard you were the best informant in the Academy."

"I am not an informant. I am an information *collector*," the man said, quickly and furiously, and grimaced. "I'm insulted that you would consider me to be in the same category as those sleazebags."

"Oh, well, I apologize." Washu recrossed her legs in an exaggerated fashion.

"Th-that's no problem. They would seem the same to people who don't know." The man had completely fallen for her charms.

In fact, Washu came here precisely *because* she knew the difference. This man did not sell information; he was indeed a collector. He saw value in the process of gathering knowledge, and he did not consider using that information for business reasons. Thus, he had different priorities than informants did. Furthermore, despite the man's indifference to information that was easily accessible, he spared no expense gathering information that he deemed useful. The problem was...

"Since you do collect information, how do you acquire it?"

"I buy it. People come to me with information from all over that galaxy, and

it's quite difficult to select only that information which is most valuable."

"But I heard you're the top collector in the Academy. You must have quite a discerning ear for information." Collectors loved to boast about themselves. Some did not want to share their collections, but most liked to show off. This one was no exception, especially with such an attractive audience.

The man talked endlessly about his methods, preferred genres, memory capacity, hardships and struggles, and, to top it all off, his gripes about other collectors. Washu was not averse to such talk. And since she herself was a collector of books, it was easy for her to play along.

After the man finished his spiel, Washu got down to business. "Don't you do any gathering yourself?"

"Meaning?"

"Wiretapping or hacking, for example."

"Some people do engage in such activities, but they're outside my area of expertise. We information collectors call that 'restoration' among ourselves, and there are definitely some who enjoy it. But my objective is solely to collect. Besides, those people aren't collectors. They're informants."

"But you possess information from those people?"

"I see... That's what you're after. Yes, I do. Some of the juiciest," he stated proudly, eyes still focused on her body. He probably thought he was being discreet, but his behavior was obvious. What he desired was plain as day. "Someone like you, who understands, is so rare... Would you like to make this a regular thing and get together once in a while to talk?"

Hmm, he wants to start with normal socializing. I thought he was going to proposition me outright, but... Tsk, how boring. Drat. Washu's thought patterns were growing similar to Naja's.

"Is...anything wrong?" The man, bewildered by her body language, asked the writhing, displeased Washu.

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing. Ho ho ho ho."

Argh, it can't be helped. It's dreadfully dull, but I'll proceed as planned. Washu

removed the disc from her inside pocket, revealing her cleavage in the process, and held it out for him. “I’d think this should be to your liking.”

The man stared at the disc quizzically, but his collector’s curiosity got the better of him, and he played the disc. It contained his unspeakable secrets; all sorts of them. It was a shameless blackmail ploy. “M-my God!” The man stood up in surprise and turned pale.

“I don’t like doing this either, but...” Washu felt some pangs of conscience, but there was no other way. She had no time to lose. There were several things she had to do and consider.

She had to find Mikumo and bring him back.

She had to infiltrate Seniwa, which had closed its borders.

Supposedly, Seniwa had registered Washu as a security threat.

She had to leave the Academy to boot.

She had to acquire the most cutting-edge technology the Academy had to offer.

Washu could have developed the technology herself...

But that would have taken hundreds of years.

The only way for Washu to get the technology in a short amount of time was to steal it.

And for that, she needed the best hacking technology.

That was why Washu was here. She glanced at the man, still pale, and cleared her throat to state her business. “I would like to exchange this information...”

“This is...wonderful!!”

“Huh...?” Washu’s thoughts stopped short at the man’s unexpected reply.

“I never imagined this would be information about *myself*... Please, sell this to me. I’ll pay anything. Please!!” He grabbed Washu’s shoulders and shook her.

That’s not what you’re supposed to ask for! This turn of events fulfilled her goal. Still, Washu felt very, very sad for some reason.

“How’d it go?” Noticing that Washu seemed depressed when she got back, Naja opened her mouth in surprise. “You didn’t fail, did you? Are you okay? Did he do anything to you?” She worriedly peered into Washu’s face.

“No, everything went well... I just feel a little vexed,” Washu answered weakly.

“...?” And then... “Ha ha ha ha! Gah ha ha ha ha ha! Haaaaah ha ha ha hahahaha aha hahah!!” Upon hearing Washu’s story, Naja rolled on the floor, laughing like she never laughed before.

“Grown-ups are the worst...” Washu took on her child form and pouted in the corner of the room.

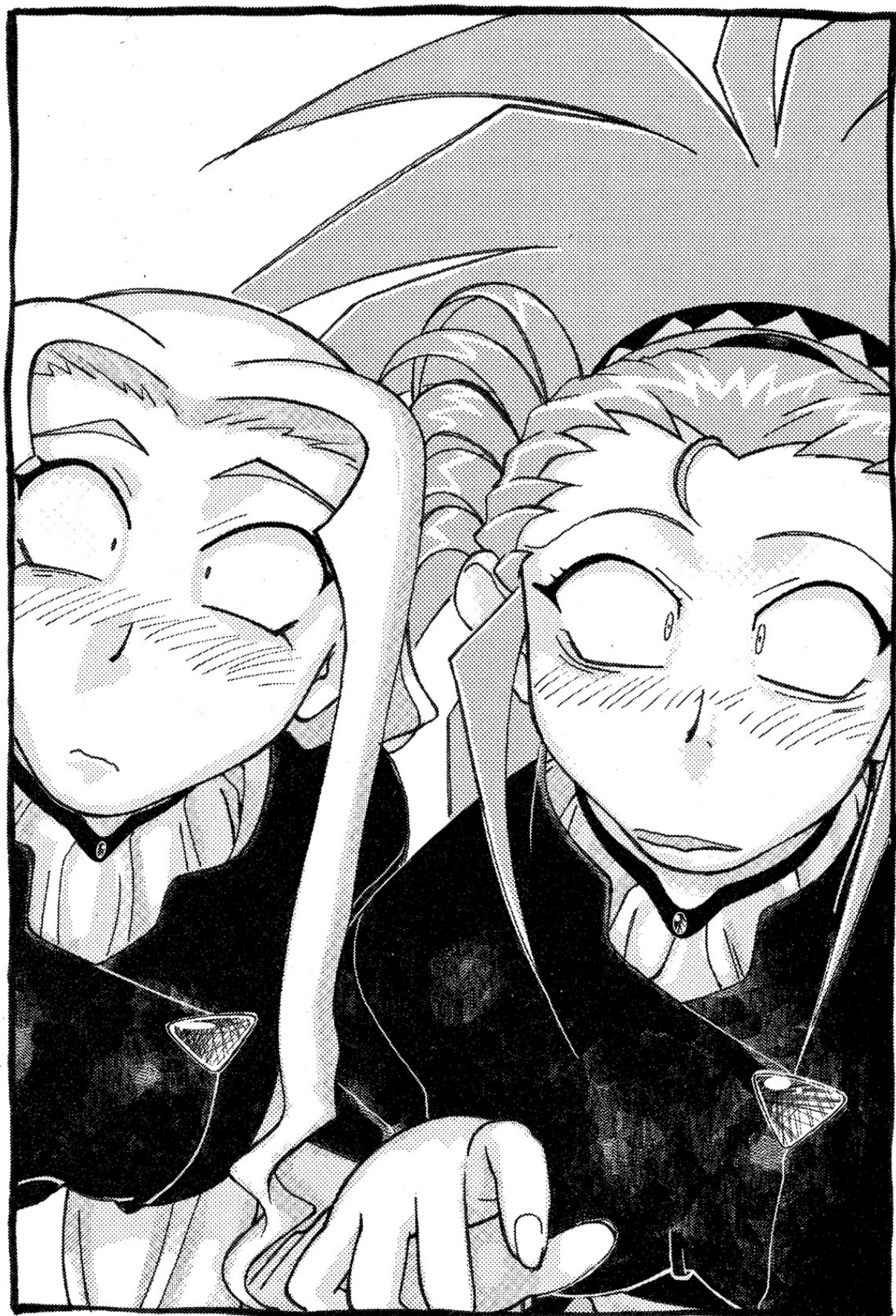
“I-I’m sorry... Heh, s-sorry. Heh heh heh...” Naja laughed too hard, and the muscles of her stomach contorted in a spasm. “But isn’t it a *good* thing that you got what you wanted?”

“Yeah, but...”

“You know what they say, time is money.” Rushed by Naja, Washu played the disc she got from the collector.

“Wow, this is amazing. I never imagined this way of organizing it.” Naja exclaimed, seeing the disc’s information categorization. Jurai later adopted the structure and used it continuously, unchanged save for two upgrades. “This is a *lot* of information. Say, Washu, what is *this*...?”

Washu played back the part that Naja pointed out. It was a porn film. The two of them gazed intently at the monitor for a moment, entranced.



“I’ve never seen one so...*intense* before. Say, Washu.”

“You want a copy of this?”

“Yeah.”

Eventually, they finally fished out what they were looking for: the identity of the Academy’s greatest hacker. “*H-him??*” they muttered, staring at the monitor, dumbfounded. The picture on the monitor was none other than Clay.

“Well, it’s darkest under the lamppost, as they say,” Naja mused. “I suppose it’s not surprising. Still, this could be a nuisance. Maybe we could get some dirt on him and make him cooperate? But then he’d have dirt on *us*.” Dealing with Clay would be tricky. Naja was lost in thought.

Washu turned to her, determined. “But...”

“I know. We need his help.”

“His *skills*, you mean,” Washu said, despondent.

“Yes... That’s *it*, Washu-chan!”

“What?”

“We only need help from his *skills*. Heh heh heh.” Having come up with a cunning plan, Naja laughed suggestively. “We hack into his system, the whole thing. Figure out which parts are heavily guarded. Oh, and be sure to use my lab equipment...” As soon as Naja got an idea into her head, she carried it out at once. That was who she was and what made her great.

Seeing her friend working briskly gave Washu confidence, but she also felt a little bit sorry for herself. This meant she had to cross paths with Clay.

Before the day was over, they identified the location Clay used to store valuable files. Washu talked to Naja, who was furiously tapping away on the keyboard. “What are we going to do now, Naja?”

“Like I thought, there are traps and malware set up to guard against any outside access... But his own equipment shouldn’t have anything like that.”

“His own...? You’re not actually talking about...”

“Yeah. We’re going to sneak into his house and take the information.”

Washu now understood what Naja had been laughing about earlier. “But how? The security system...”

“Washu-chan, the Academy develops its own security. It’s good enough for official use in Royal business, so why would anybody use some other system? That stingy Clay would never actually *pay* for anything when he didn’t have to. Besides, the security is controlled by the Department of Philosophy’s office, and it’s further supervised by the Student Union Information Bureau security department,” Naja said, a broad smile of satisfaction stretching across her face.

“Just like handing a spare key to a thief... Oh! Wait, you mean the security system you put on your own system at your expense...?”

“Duh. I couldn’t let the office handle it, that’s too dangerous.”

“I hate grown-ups...”

“I didn’t have much choice. I blame the people who weren’t doing their jobs.”

“...?!”

“Don’t you know, being in the Department of Philosophy?” Naja asked. “Each researcher, upon request from a researcher above Class 3 in the Department of Philosophy, is obligated to submit their findings... But quite a few don’t bother.”

“If they’re in the middle of the study, they should be excluded from that obligation.”

“You should know, being a scientist. The point of completion depends on individual interpretation. It’s the same logic used by a new highway that refuses to reduce its toll to pay off the road even after the promised numbers of years of higher prices has passed.”

“Urk, that’s quite a persuasive comparison...”

“Is it usable or not? The Philosophy researchers will decide. This place isn’t for hobbyists. If people can’t *use* the results... For example, even if a car could be built with a new technology, some kid’s tricycle is still more useful to society if that tech is just a report sitting in a desk drawer.” Naja’s tone became increasingly rough.

“You must’ve had a terrible experience, Naja.”

“They said, ‘Nobody appreciates the true value of my research!’”

“Now, now.” Washu soothed her. “I bet you doled out some payback.”

“I developed it myself—something better than theirs. And I wrote up all their defects and shortcomings in a report and sent it to them.”

“I can just imagine their mortified faces.”

“It made me feel better, but I wasted my time,” Naja said. “In any case, this institution’s original point has been twisted. And the laws can’t be revised because the legislators are all on the other side.”

“So that’s why there’s an Information Bureau.”

“It’s supposed to be there to protect the technology...”

“Is it really a part of the Student Union?”

Naja paused, apparently lost in thought.

“What?”

“It’s a secret. ♥” They blankly stared at each other.

“Maybe I should pay to install my own security system.”

“I’ll do the installation for you.”

That night, Washu and Naja staked out Clay’s mansion, waiting for an opportunity to sneak in. Clay, having breathed in the sleeping gas Naja fed into the security system, was snoring in bed.

“Nerds are so sad. He may boast an ironclad firewall online, but he’s defenseless against a simple physical burglary.”

“How is this a ‘simple burglary?’” asked Washu. “We have military-grade special ops equipment.”

“Of course we do. It was all developed by the Academy.”

“The Academy is kind of a nasty place.”

“Here it is.” In a few minutes, they found Clay’s hidden safe.

“How did you find it so fast?”

“I have a monopoly on that kind of information.”

“Even details like that are leaked?”

“Only what could be located where.”

Washu put the data disc from the safe into her portable terminal and booted it up. “You were right, it doesn’t even have a password.” The data was already compressed, and she copied it quickly. “I’m done.”

“Then we don’t need to linger.”

Washu put the disc back into the safe and got up to leave at once.

“Washu-chan, this outfit is in rather bad taste, isn’t it?” Naja pointed to the clothes by Clay’s bedside.

“I’ve only seen him in his uniform or his lab coat.”

“Isn’t this outfit Medici?”*

“So he splurged, for once. Let’s go, Naja.” Naja did not move. “What are you doing? Come on.”

“It’s got to be for a woman,” Naja muttered in conclusion, arms crossed.

“Naja! This is a bad habit of yours. Come on and let’s go.” Washu seized Naja by her collar, and they escaped from Clay’s mansion.

For thirty whole hours afterwards, Washu did not sleep a wink, spending every minute looking through Clay’s data.

“You should get some sleep. This is a long haul.” Naja emerged from her nap.

“There isn’t anything that looks like information on hacking techniques...”

“What? Aw, man. From his personality, I was sure he’d preserve his data... I thought for sure it was this one...” Naja mumbled, troubled.

“I thought we copied everything on that disc. What should we do?” Washu’s expression clouded over.

“We’ll figure something out. Cheer up,” Naja hugged Washu’s shoulders and stroked her hair. “Hey, what’s this?” Noticing some data on the monitor, Naja leaned in to type some keystrokes. “What... ‘My Glorious Achievement Log?’ Heh...sounds great. Let’s take a look.” She merrily removed Washu from the chair and started typing.

“Naja, private data is off limits.”

“As if he ever respected anyone else’s privacy... Here we go... What’s this...?”

Day X: I accessed Naja’s data banks today, the entry read. I couldn’t even call it a warm-up, as there was no resistance whatsoever. That security level is nothing to me...

Naja’s face twitched, rage slowly taking over her expression. In the journal, Clay sang his own praises, touted his hacking skills, and, all the while, sprinkled in ridicule for the people whose data (mostly private information) he obtained.

“Th-that bastard!! I’ll *murder* him!!” Naja grabbed the nearest military-grade special ops weapon and deliberately rose from her chair. Washu had to hastily hold her back.

There were entries about Washu, too, but she chose not to look at them. She knew that, if she did, she might just let Naja do as she pleased.

A few days later, as they finished up analyzing and organizing Clay’s data, Naja came home from buying groceries in a good mood. “Washu-chan, Washu-chan!!”

“What happened? Anything good?”

“Oh, this is *great*... Remember that awful outfit we saw when we snuck into Clay’s house?”

“The one you were convinced had to do with a woman?” Washu asked.

“Yeah. As you know, new students get a volunteer guide to show them

around the school and help with administrative formalities. That was supposedly the outfit he chose to act as host for a new student.”

“Clay? No way. He wouldn’t pick something so expensive...”

“Turns out, he was actually aggressive about it. He used some shady tricks to get the other hosting candidates booted from consideration.”

“So, she was cute...?”

“*Exactly*. The rate at which hosts and new students eventually marry is pretty high, you know.”

“Well, well, so spring has finally arrived for Clay? I hope this’ll calm him down,” Washu answered, already disinterested.

“I wouldn’t be so ecstatic if that was where the story ended. There’s *more*! So, after they filled out the paperwork, Clay took her on a campus tour and to his own room. Then he started lecturing her all about himself!”

“You mean like in the diary?” Washu gasped. Naja nodded. “Ouch, sounds painful.”

“And then he tried to show her some slides of his achievements. And then...” Trying to suppress her laughter, Naja found it hard to continue.

“What’s the matter, Naja?”

“What showed up on the monitor was hard-core porn, full screen and full volume! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!!” Naja burst out laughing and started rolling around on the floor.

“What...?” Washu suddenly seemed uncomfortable.

“And *what* an uproar. The new girl ran crying to the office, and everyone from the admin to all the students with grudges against him stormed over. Even the newspaper reporters came! The judicial administrator is going to decide on his fate.”

“What’s Clay saying about this?”

“That it’s a conspiracy, of course. I mean, there *are* plenty of people who have something against him. But then, it’s still his fault. He brought this upon himself.

The newspaper and magazine reporters are out searching for the culprit.”

“Wh-why?”

“It’s obvious. This incident will go down as one of the year’s top three news events. Whoever did this is a hero. What’s wrong, Washu-chan? You look pale... No—you *didn’t*! When we snuck into his place?” Naja drew closer.

“I-I mean... I felt sorry that he was alone, so I did it to thank him for the data. I thought it would serve his needs. I wanted to surprise him. I didn’t mean any harm...”

“Oh my god! Well done, Washu-chan!!” Naja hugged Washu in joy and twirled her around. “The Department of Philosophy will win News Topic of the Year!!”

“You’ve got to be joking! Everyone will find out we broke into his house.”

“Urk, that’s true... But, Washu-chan, we could leak just a little...”

“I don’t want to be involved with Clay.”

“Well, all right.”

Later, Clay was suspended for a month and earned the nickname “octopus” from the other students. The Academy planet contained a creature similar to Earth’s octopus, which lived in a shell. The male would use bait to lure a female out of her shell, then drag her into his own shell to copulate. Furthermore, with a year-round mating season, they multiplied like rabbits. That was why Clay earned his nickname.

“I’ll find the culprit and shove the prize and plaque for the News Topic of the Year down their throat!” shouted Clay venomously in his awards ceremony interview.

Even though they could not identify the award winner, the judges were unanimous in their decision. Never in the award’s history had the recipient remained unidentified, but that just added to the notoriety of the year’s winner. Washu vowed to herself that she would never be discovered. However, she did not realize that this would be the beginning of a very long, protracted, and mostly one-sided battle with Clay.

Washu took several months to apply and develop Clay's technology, and soon completed a system that could freely infiltrate anything not managed by Jurai's Royal Trees. Procuring the necessary technical materials, and having absorbed all the relevant technology, Washu was approaching the level of expertise possessed by the Academy's best, such as Professor Ikuma or the grad students.

Then, one day, two things happened.

The first occurred while Washu was searching through Jurai's top secret files. She discovered and accessed a familiar item. "Report by Tatsuki Nishia Jurai... Nishia-dono." It was the report on the incident that had alarmed Nishia, a Juraian Royal, when Washu first arrived at the Academy.

"Someone you know?" Naja paused in her work and peered at Washu's monitor. "Nishia? Oh, the Juraian Royal. He was your bodyguard."

"Yes... What?! The Jurai fleet that struck the Shank base along with *Shippris*... was devastated?!"

"I see. That was why they made a fuss about it up top."

"You knew?"

"I didn't know the details, but Professor Ikuma received a confidential analysis request."

The gist of the report was that the Juraian fleet had discovered a Shank Guild base the size of a nation state. It was a plant, producing everything from food and commodities to planetary-class battleships. Considering its scale, it was an important interchange. That was why they so relentlessly pursued Kanamitsu.

Bulldozing Shank's fierce resistance, the Jurai fleet had just annihilated about half of the facilities. An energy reading detected a large battleship several hundred times the size of a planetary-class ship. The battleship's name was *Shippris*, and it was an unusual vessel, in that most of its structure was an energy generator. Internalizing a quantity of energy so tremendous that it rivaled a star, the battleship fired directly at the Royal Ship.

"That's weird. For the energy readings generated, the attack was actually strangely weak." Washu looked quizzically at the data set's values. Actually, the weak attack wasn't much of a surprise. The fired energy was only a small

fraction—a few thousandths—of what was generated in the reactor. Of course, even if *Shippris* used all the reactor's energy, the opponent was still a Third Generation Royal Ship. Penetrating its ethereal Light Hawk Wings was impossible.

“And yet, the Royal Ship was destroyed.”

Washu nodded at Naja's words. The Juraian fleet, in shock over the sinking of the Royal Ship, underwent a Shank counteroffensive; the report described how the Juraian fleet finally destroyed the large ship and Guild relay point, sacrificing 80% of the fleet in the process.

“I see. So this is the data Professor Ikuma was asked to analyze.” Naja reached over Washu's shoulder and opened the data file on the Royal Ship's destruction.

“What's this...?” Looking at the image of the moment the battleship's energy blast struck *Shippris*, Washu noticed a unique streak of energy.

“What? I don't see anything.”

“How can that be? It's right here,” Washu pointed at the streak of light on the monitor.

“I see where you're pointing, but I still don't see a thing.”

“B-but...” Washu checked over each data type. No data was detected on that streak of light.

“Washu-chan, can you really see something?”

“Yes.” Washu could only nod at Naja's question because it was true.

“It's not in the databanks, and it's visible only to you. It's concerning that the Light Hawk Wings have a similar quality. When attacked, the Royal Tree undoubtedly deployed its Light Hawk Wings. But it was still destroyed.”

“What happens when Light Hawk Wings strike each other?”

“There's no record of anyone conducting such an experiment. That might be why the Royal Ship was destroyed.” That was as far as their deductions went. They would get into serious trouble if they were discovered perusing the data without permission. Even in the Department of Philosophy, Academy students were forbidden from any type of involvement with the Royal Trees, Jurai's most

carefully guarded secret.

The second incident took place when Washu carefully copied the data and returned to the directory level. She suddenly found herself connected to the deepest part of Jurai, which she had previously been unable to access: the archives of information on the Royal Trees. It was not clear why, but it was not due to any improvement in Washu's hacking skills.

"We're connected to the lower level. Washu-chan, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. What *is* this?"

She had found the biological data of the entire Royal Family, from the very first Emperor to the present day.

"Genetics, astral...assembly, bio-fortification... What *is* this?! What are they creating?" Only part of the data was remotely understandable to Washu and Naja. It was common knowledge that the Jurai Royal Family possessed some form of bio-fortification, but that in itself was not a rare thing. Most of the intelligent life in the galaxy benefited from bio-fortification. The major difference was that the Jurai Royal Family's technology was *far* more advanced.

"From analyzing tiny fragments of cellular remains from the Shank Guild representative you encountered when you first came to the Academy, we know he was a soldier, carefully bio-fortified over generations..."

"And yet, he didn't stand a chance against Nishia-dono."

"Yes, but if we were to believe this data here, even civilians who become a part of the Juraian Royal Family through adoption or marriage gain the Royal Family's power through this bio-fortification. That's impossible, even with the Academy's technology!"

Washu and Naja stared at each other. They seemed to have come across something they were not supposed to see. However, their pure curiosity as scientists overruled their fear. As they tried to dig deeper, wading through the waves of incomprehensible data, their access was suddenly denied.

Were we discovered?! They both thought for a second, but there was no anti-hacker counterattack that they could see. *Was this an accident or on purpose?* There was no way for them to find out.

“Oh well. It’s too dangerous to dig deeper.”

Washu nodded at Naja’s words. “How should we deal with this—gack!!” The most deeply buried data she had recorded was gone. The rest of the top secret information was unscathed.

“What’s going on?” Naja’s face showed only confusion, but Washu had formed a hypothesis from the brief glimpse of the data.

“Naja, I’m only speculating, but what if Jurai’s bio-fortification is a kind of biological and mental recombination by something that forms a core?”

“Could be. We might only understand a bare minimum of the data. The other thing I could imagine is that this core still receives biodata feedback from current Royal Family members.”

“Yes... But what are they trying to *do*?” Washu was very interested. Not only as a scientist, but also from a deep-rooted impulse.

“Washu-chan, this was very interesting to us, but it’s not *important* right now,” Naja reminded Washu, aware of her friend’s feelings. “It has nothing to do with your current goals.”

“Yes... You’re right.” Washu closed the data file and returned to the work she should have been doing.

Four years passed. Washu stood on Seniwa. Everything she had done—whether interfering with the various systems of each country, disrupting Jurai’s storied information network, improving high-speed interstellar spaceships and designing new engines, rewriting personal data, or developing a lifelike android—was for this moment. Washu watched the snow falling relentlessly from the skies and thanked Naja for sticking by her all this time.

“I’ve arrived at last...”

Her boy was *here*. She was finally going to see him. Deep emotion overcame Washu as she gazed toward her child’s home.

Washu and Naja

On a small hill covered in snow, there was a disproportionately large, luxurious mansion. In a child's room full of oversized antique furniture lay a little girl in bed with a cold. By her side, a woman who looked like her mother stood peacefully. She felt the girl's forehead to check her temperature and was relieved that the fever was lower than she expected.

"Good night, Miyuki," she mumbled, softly touching the girl's cheek. She left her daughter's side and snuck out of the room, careful not to wake the little girl.

This was Kuramitsu Mikamo's mansion, and the woman who just emerged from the room was Mikamo's current wife, Koyori.

Koyori walked a short way down the hall and asked "Who's there?" forcefully, but quietly, so as not to scare her sleeping daughter. She had felt someone's presence while putting her daughter to bed, and she knew that person was now close by.

In the dimly-lit hallway, a shadow winked into existence as if it had teleported. "Good evening," said Hakubi Washu.

"It seems that he's right. A review of the security shield does need to take place. Washu-sama, this way, please." Unsurprised, Koyori stated just the facts and beckoned Washu to an inner room as if offering hospitality to a guest. She demonstrated no malice or hostility.

Koyori showed Washu to the best guest room in the house. Washu sat on the sofa in the drawing room, sipping some tea, and Koyori sat down across from her. "I guess you were expecting me," Washu said.

"I was told a long time ago that you would eventually show up here," Koyori replied. "Mikamo detected a ship of unknown affiliation two days ago and has been holed up at work since."

"Oh, bother. So I was detected after all. That's above and beyond what I expected. But then, why wasn't an alarm raised?"

“It wasn’t detected by Seniwa’s army proper, only by Mikamo’s personal troops.”

“I see. He *was* an excellent student. But I feel knocked down a peg or two.”

“We knew you would come by, Washu-sama, so we simulated a number of suspected infiltration routes and developed a secret system independent from the army. We implemented the finished product six months ago. But we only detected your entry, and the ship had since been lost to us.”

“Heh, tell him I give him an A,” Washu replied with a wry smile.

Washu and Koyori had never met, but they felt as if they had been reunited after many years. They had Mikamo in common.

Koyori spoke, looking at the snow outside the window. “Mikamo said that he owed everything to Ikuma-sama, Naja-sama, and Washu-sama. His years at the Academy were the most fun he ever had.”

“I guess they’re all just memories to him now, too...”

Koyori realized upon hearing Washu’s words that Mikamo had become a memory for Washu as well.

It occurred to her that she had been trying to avoid claiming Mikamo as her own, or calling him her husband, in front of Washu.

“Thank you. I’m grateful to you.”

“What?”

“I’ve been watching Mikumo ever since I got here...” Washu explained.

“Washu-sama, I have a daughter born the same year as Mikumo-chan. Do you understand what that means?”

“You’re the same as Mikamo.”

Koyori nodded. “We vowed to each other that we would change things on this planet. That we would never let the children suffer in the same way we had. We’re a family now. So I cannot let you, or anybody else, have him.” Koyori looked at Washu with steely determination.



Washu stared back at Koyori, and they remained wordless. Only the wind howling outside the window declared the passage of time. Then, Koyori slowly closed her eyes.

“Mikumo-chan has your eyes...” She laughed mournfully and stood up. Though she wouldn’t hand him over, it was a fact that Washu and Mikumo were mother and son. Who was right? There was no correct solution. So she paused on the way to the door and said, “Won’t you spend the night here? The weather should clear up tomorrow. Mikumo-chan hasn’t been able to play ball outside, so he’ll be happy.”

“...”

“Please make yourself at home.” Koyori bowed slightly and left the room.

She’s giving me an opportunity to take Mikumo... Washu thought and continued to stare at the door. No, the true answer she was trying so hard to look for was inside of her.

“It’s so nice out today, you should go play outside,” Koyori said to Mikumo the next day and handed him a ball. “Be careful.”

She sadly watched Mikumo run off and willed herself to go inside the house. Indoors, she carried a breakfast tray to Miyuki’s room.

“Miyuki?” Her daughter, who was supposed to be sleeping in her room, was gone. Her blanket had slid off her bed onto the floor. “Oh, no, she didn’t...” Koyori searched and found a child’s footprints on the stairs from the terrace to the ground floor. “I didn’t want her to be there to see Mikumo-chan taken away...”

She hesitated for a moment, but then called the guards to order them to go after her daughter.

If only they make it in time...

But that means robbing a mother of her child.

If only they don't make it in time...

But that means the loss of a precious family member.

All these thoughts swirled in conflict inside of Koyori.

It was a clear day, without a cloud in the sky, and the sun's rays reflected on the pure white snow to create a magical space. Washu and Mikumo were there. Washu held the ball Mikumo had been playing with. They turned their green eyes towards each other. That was all they could do.

"Little boy..." Washu slowly reached out for him, and Mikumo raised his hand in response.

Just a little more, a little further... As Washu thought those words, Miyuki's voice rang out, calling Mikumo through the still air.

"Oniichama!"

"Miyuki?" Mikumo instinctively turned around and ran towards Miyuki, who was panting clouds of white breath.

"Oniichama."

"Mother told you, you have to stay in bed," Mikumo said and gallantly draped his own cloak over Miyuki.

"Oniichama!"

Washu saw Miyuki glare daggers at her, clutching Mikumo. Washu's breath caught in her throat. *She looks exactly like her mother did last night... Those eyes when she said Mikumo wasn't going anywhere.*

She looked sorrowfully at Mikumo, who was fretting over Miyuki. *Should I take him away?* She was stricken with dark thoughts, tormenting herself. She wished she could do it, right now. The impulse lasted but a moment.

"I'm sorry."

"...?!" Washu noticed the little girl's sorrowful eyes, staring at her.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Her eyes stared back at Washu, tearful...

She wants Mikumo to herself, but she can’t do it because she sympathizes with me. Those same kind eyes her mother has... With a deep sigh, Washu closed her own eyes.

“All right, little girl... You win,” Washu murmured quietly and created more snow flurries around her. In an instant, everything turned white. Her body melted into the snow, along with her feelings, her desires, and everything else.

Farewell, my boy...

“Are you sure, Washu?” Naja said, as she prepared for takeoff. Washu had returned to the bridge without a word.

“Mikumo has already found where he belongs. Children eventually leave their parents, although I didn’t think it would be this soon.”

“So, in other words, you fought over a guy and lost to a little pipsqueak.” Naja’s words lacked emotion, but that was her way of comforting someone.

“Urk... I-I suppose if you put it that way...”

“Children don’t understand the allure of maturity. Maybe you could’ve won in your child form?”

“Heh, maybe I made a mistake.”

Washu looked more peaceful than Naja had expected. “Okay, let’s go home, Washu-chan.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Washu and Naja’s ship set sail. Washu quietly watched Seniwa on the dome monitor. The emotion passing through her heart was a mother’s joy.

My son is being raised by a strong woman and growing so fast. It isn’t like I will never see him again. He even has a lovely companion. Though she seemed rather strong-willed, heh. And above all, he seems happy... There is nothing else for me to desire for him. There’s so much more for me to do right now. There’s

so much I still don't know about the three jewels, or myself. Everything is yet to come.

Naja smiled at her. Washu returned her look, a smile playing about the edge of her mouth. And she looked away from Seniwa, now growing more and more distant, out into the jet-black of space. She felt an emptiness, and a freedom that was almost scary.

THE END

Afterword

by Kajishima Masaki

Thank you for waiting, everyone. What? You weren't waiting at all? (I'm playing the straight man here.) It's been a year and a few months since the previous novel. So many things have happened. Three OVAs, two games, and prep work for a TV series... Who am I supposed to blame? Of course, the stress never lets up...

Anyway! A lot has happened. That's why I was late. I'm sorry.

So...it's spring. Luckily, I don't have hay fever, so I enjoy spring. I wish I could forget everything and just relax. It's not that I want to *go* anywhere, I just want to hang out, like Mihoshi or Ryo-Ohki, and space...out...

Spring comes, and after summer comes fall...then winter, and then spring again. Spinning, spinning, my head is spinning... It's 6:00 AM right now (haven't I hit a hundred lines yet?), so my brain is in a comfortable state of being naturally high. Kuroda-kun was busy, so we couldn't do an interview together, but he sent me an e-mail that said, "Please write about a hundred lines for the afterword." However, I have nothing to write about, and my brain isn't working right now. And things aren't going to improve at this point if I go to bed. So...

AFTERWORD SKIT THEATER:

"Ryo-Ohki and the Butterfly Prohibition"

It was a spring day.

"Tenchi and Washu-san, do you have a minute?" Katsuhito, Tenchi's grandfather, had arrived at the house for lunch.

"Shall we talk in my room?" From Katsuhito's expression, Washu realized that this would be an important conversation. She led them down the stairs to the

door below.

“Everyone, lunch is ready.” Later, Sasami’s call caused everybody to assemble. Washu, Tenchi, and Katsuhito also emerged from the lab.

“What was that about?” asked Ryoko.

“This has nothing to do with you,” said Washu curtly.

“Hmph.”

As they sat after lunch, they could see several butterflies out the window, fluttering about in the soft spring sunshine, seeking nectar from flowers.

“Meow!”

“Ryo-Ohki!” Tenchi stopped Ryo-Ohki from going outside.

“Ryo-Ohki, don’t chase after butterflies anymore,” said Tenchi and Washu, both looking unusually solemn.

“Meow?” Ryo-Ohki had no idea what this was about and looked vacantly back at them.

“Ryo-Ohki, don’t chase after butterflies anymore,” repeated Tenchi.

“M-mew...” Ryo-Ohki finally understood the words, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Why, Tenchi-oniichan?!” Sasami, who had been listening, blurted out. “Sure, Ryo-chan acts like a cat, so she loves chasing after butterflies and trips and falls down hills, or into the river...”

“You know, Sasami,” Washu gently said and then explained that Ryo-Ohki was a battleship’s computer unit. Thus, even if she fell off a cliff, or into the river, or if a car hit her, she would never get hurt. “*Obviously*, since she’s the greatest masterpiece I’ve ever made.”

“Um...Washu-san?” Tenchi interrupted Washu as she started to go off-script, and continued. “But, Sasami-chan, other people—the normal people of Earth—get the shock of their lives.”

“Oh...”

Yes, that would cause a panic: an apparent preschooler, a cute little girl, chasing after a butterfly and falling off a cliff into a river and then getting hit by a car.

“Okay...” Even Sasami was convinced.

“Meeew!” Ryo-Ohki...was not.

“There’s nothing to be done, Ryo-chan,” Sasami said gently.

“Mew...”

And so, Ryo-Ohki was forbidden from chasing butterflies unless someone else was with her.

A few days later...

“Ryo-Ohki...you can’t chase dragonflies anymore.”

“Meeew!”

THE END

And...scene. Okay, your turn, Kuroda-kun.

After the Afterword

by Kuroda Yousuke

(STUDIO ORPHEE)

I'm...soooooooooooooooooooooooo!! There's no "big show" this time, either... On the other hand, that might be perfect for those people who'd rather read more of Kajishima-san's personal and wonderful writing and not hear anything from dumb ol' me. So really, all's well that ends well. That's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it.

Actually, this time (again?), I was the one who was supposed to be making things happen, but I relied too much on Kajishima-san and caused all sorts of trouble. I had to put off the publication date, and Kajishima-san's artwork was done before the text. I made Kajishima-san rush on the editing, and I caused Sato-chama, my editor, so much anxiety that he instantly aged seven million years. There's an unforgivable villain here, and that's me. *C'mon, apologize!* I hate myself and the stars.

But then, with the publication of this third novel, “Washu,” we’ve managed to include eight plot points that Kajishima-shi created for *True Tenchi Muyo!* There are sixteen in all, so there are eight left. We’re finally at the halfway point, so I guess I’ll be writing three more books someday, which means I might just be working on *Tenchi* even in the 21st century. That’s amazing when I think about it, but I should probably get back to work.

Oh yeah, Akara Naja, whom Kajishima-san has drawn in doujinshi before, takes center stage for the first time, and a distant relative of a character who showed up in the second novel appears in a subtle way, and Juraian warriors are super cool, so there are so many highlights. Kajishima-san is really a fiend of a super-creator who just grabs the hearts of his fans this way, wraps them around his little finger, and never lets go. I'm just an assistant writing the prose. Actually, I'm the one most enjoying the world that Kajishima-san creates in *Tenchi*.

Did Kajishima-san think up this magnificent story right from the start? He's so

amazing, and I will follow Kajishima-sensei forever and ever, and to the ends of the earth. He's like the ocean... I know you young, hopelessly romantic youth these days (that's kind of a blunt way of saying it) are thinking that, but to be brutally honest, this? It's nothing. I have worked with Kajishima-san for five or so years since the *Tenchi* anime, and I get to hear tidbits I've never seen or heard before on a monthly basis. For real. And the crazy thing is that they harmonize beautifully with the previous canon. So, the Kajishima *Tenchi*-verse will likely keep expanding and ballooning until Kajishima-san dies or until it explodes. To put all these ideas into a story, we'd have to publish one each week with multiple writers, a la *Perry Rhodan*. Hey, Fujimi Books, don't take that seriously! It was just a French Orphee joke, for crying out loud.

Well, with this book coming out, Okuda Hitoshi-sensei, the manga artist, will hopefully get many new ideas for the manga version of *Tenchi*. I hope you'll get to work on that, Char Aznable. Okuda-san, let's go out for a drink sometime (why can't I just call him?!). What did you say? "Get back to work?" La la la la la. Let's not stand on ceremony! C'mon, everyone, let's dance and party and cry and rip our hair out and laugh and agonize and sing and shout and fall in despair. Tra la la la la, que será, será... *Jojo* is over!! (Super shock!!)

Anyway, besides *Tenchi*, I'm working with Kajishima-san on the (hopefully) acclaimed broadcast on the WOWOW network, *Dual! Parallel Trouble Adventure*. I'm credited ostensibly as the story editor, but I'm swamped with the work of condensing Kajishima-san's epic (how is it always so epic?!) ideas into a thirteen-episode series, and I just feel like a glorified traffic control officer sometimes. But I'm enjoying myself, so if you have a BS (broadcast satellite) antenna, you should watch (it's unscrambled, so it's free). Why am I saying this? Not because of the *Dual/Tenchi* Kajishima connection but because I'm writing a manga for *Monthly Dragon Junior* published by Fujimi Books. I wasn't even asked to mention this, but I'm the son of a merchant, so this is basically a clever chain reaction marketing ploy. And the manga artist is none other than Ushida Yuji-sensei. He probably doesn't even remember, but we went out drinking once. I just wanted to name-drop.

For the *Dual!* anime, Kajishima-san looks over the script and the storyboards, submits concept designs, and is hysterically busy. It looks brutal, so what am I

doing, dragging him down with this novel? I deserve a thousand deaths and obliteration and conviction and exile and *The Ring* and *Uzumaki* and another - subliminal advertisement and awesomeness. But you know, this was my first time writing action scenes with realistic robots! This will go down in my personal anime history. My first was *Parallel Trouble Adventure*! Wow, that sounds really fake when it's just the subtitle by itself...

I've gotta take a moment to write about me now. The novels that I'm working on with Fujimi went out spectacularly, with *Magical Girl Pretty Sammy* and *Photon* (just say they concluded, dammit!), so the only thing I'm working on now is this *True Tenchi* series. The End.

Not! Fujimi is finally publishing a completely Kuroda-original novel! Hooray for plans!! The *Monthly Comic Dragon* Magazine Editorial Department is doing such a wonderful job. I sob like a man, which then turns into full-on bawling. I cry so much I should fail as a writer, which makes me cry more. I can only say that it's about some unbelievable stuff, but I'm working hard so that the proposal can become reality. So, if it does become real, please check it out. Oh, the illustrations are going to be by Uon Taraku-sensei, who was rumored to have had a bromance with Kuroda during *Sammy* and *Photon*. It was also rumored that Kurata Hideyuki was jealous! Oh, this is a while ago, but when I was working on *Tenchi* and *Photon* with Kajishima-san, I said to him, "Kajishima-san, when I write my own original novel, will you do the art for me?"

And he said, "Of course." This oath between men (don't tell me he agreed offhandedly!) is yet to be fulfilled, but I'm doing everything I can to make it happen. If only my prose and composition skills leveled up about three times, I could proudly ask Kajishima-san to collaborate. What if I suddenly go up to him in ten years and ask, "Will you do the art for me?!" *Before you start agonizing, do some work, self!* But I just finished my part on *Dual*! In other words, I've been working on *Dual*! instead of working on *True Tenchi*. They're both by Kajishima, so I wasn't sure what to prioritize. Well, of course I do know, but I ignored Sato-chama's increasing wrinkles and prioritized *Dual*!, which airs relentlessly every week. Still, I was late turning in the scripts and got Asada-san, the showrunner, mad at me. Chasing two rabbits allows you to catch neither; I'll pull off catching both, dammit! And yet, I failed at both. Proverbs are hard.

I'm blabbering on about stupid things, and I'm an idiot, I'm such an idiot, ha ha ha! (I'll be rotting in hell.) So, here's a teaser—if there is ever a *True Tenchi* novel four, that certain someone who fought Tenchi in the first OVA series might make an appearance. I'll declare here and now that the *Tenchi*-verse past depicted in *True Tenchi* also has foresight into the future. For the upcoming (though, as of this writing, I don't know if it really will happen) third OVA series, I'd like everyone to read *True Tenchi* carefully to prepare themselves. Actually, writing this book made me want to write more of Ryoko and Ayeka in a script.

P.S. I advertised it all over the place and still made everyone wait, but I finally got the homepage up and running for Studio Orphee, where I work. Actually, since I don't want to be a liar, I'll warn you that I made it in such a hurry that there's really no content. Still, please look it up just to check it out, even though it's guaranteed to be just a placeholder page, and a failure, and a big regret of mine.

P.P.S. (Kajishima) I *do* remember that I promised to do the artwork.

P.P.P.S. (Kuroda) Yay!

THE END



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